

New and  
Selected  
Poems {<sup>1962</sup><sub>2012</sub>}

CHARLES  
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Washer, Gallows Etiquette, In  
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Many of the poems in this collection have been revised and retitled.

*for Abigail*

## ***from SELECTED EARLY POEMS***

### **Butcher Shop**

Sometimes walking late at night  
I stop before a closed butcher  
shop.

There is a single light in the store  
Like the light in which the convict  
digs his tunnel.

An apron hangs on the hook:  
The blood on it smeared into a  
map  
Of the great continents of blood,  
The great rivers and oceans of  
blood.

There are knives that glitter like  
altars  
In a dark church  
Where they bring the cripple and

the imbecile  
To be healed.

There is a wooden block where  
bones are broken,  
Scraped clean—a river dried to its  
bed  
Where I am fed,  
Where deep in the night I hear a  
voice.

## Cockroach

When I see a cockroach,  
I don't grow violent like you.  
I stop as if a friendly greeting  
Had passed between us.

•

This roach is familiar to me.  
We met here and there,  
In the kitchen at midnight,  
And now on my pillow.

•

I can see it has a couple  
Of my black hairs  
Sticking out of its head,  
And who knows what else?

•

It carries a false passport—  
Don't ask me how I know.  
A false passport, yes,  
With my baby picture.

## Tapestry

It hangs from heaven to earth.  
There are trees in it, cities, rivers,  
small pigs and moons. In one  
corner  
the snow falling over a charging  
cavalry,  
in another women are planting  
rice.

You can also see:  
a chicken carried off by a fox,  
a naked couple on their wedding  
night,  
a column of smoke,  
an evil-eyed woman spitting into a  
pail of milk.

What is behind it?  
—Space, plenty of empty space.

And who is talking now?  
—A man asleep under his hat.

What happens when he wakes up?  
—He'll go into a barbershop.  
They'll shave his beard, nose, ears,  
and hair,  
To make him look like everyone  
else.

## Evening

The snail gives off stillness.  
The weed is blessed.  
At the end of a long day  
The man finds joy, the water  
peace.

Let all be simple. Let all stand still  
Without a final direction.  
That which brings you into the  
world  
To take you away at death  
Is one and the same;  
The shadow long and pointy  
Is its church.

At night some understand what  
the grass says.  
The grass knows a word or two.  
It is not much. It repeats the same

word  
Again and again, but not too  
loudly . . .

## The Inner Man

It isn't the body  
That's a stranger.  
It's someone else.

We poke the same  
Ugly mug  
At the world.  
When I scratch,  
He scratches too.

There are women  
Who claim to have held him.  
A dog follows me about.  
It might be his.

If I'm quiet, he's quieter.  
So I forget him.  
Yet, as I bend down  
To tie my shoelaces,  
He's standing up.

We cast a single shadow.  
Whose shadow?  
I'd like to say:  
"He was in the beginning

And he'll be in the end,"  
But one can't be sure.

At night  
As I sit  
Shuffling the cards of our silence,  
I say to him:

"Though you utter  
Every one of my words,  
You are a stranger.  
It's time you spoke."

## Fear

Fear passes from man to man  
Unknowing,  
As one leaf passes its shudder  
To another.

All at once the whole tree is  
trembling,  
And there is no sign of the wind.

## Summer Morning

I love to stay in bed  
All morning,

Covers thrown off, naked,  
Eyes closed, listening.

Outside they are opening  
Their primers  
In the little school  
Of the cornfield.

There's a smell of damp hay,  
Of horses, laziness,  
Summer sky and eternal life.

I know all the dark places  
Where the sun hasn't reached yet,  
Where the last cricket  
Has just hushed; anthills  
Where it sounds like it's raining;  
Slumbering spiders spinning  
wedding dresses.

I pass over the farmhouses  
Where the little mouths open to  
suck,  
Barnyards where a man, naked to  
the waist,  
Washes his face and shoulders  
with a hose,  
Where the dishes begin to rattle in  
the kitchen.

The good tree with its voice  
Of a mountain stream

Knows my steps.  
It, too, hushes.

I stop and listen:  
Somewhere close by  
A stone cracks a knuckle,  
Another rolls over in its sleep.

I hear a butterfly stirring  
Inside a caterpillar,  
I hear the dust talking  
Of last night's storm.

Farther ahead, someone  
Even more silent  
Passes over the grass  
Without bending it.

And all of a sudden!  
In the midst of that quiet,  
It seems possible  
To live simply on this earth.

## Dismantling the Silence

Take down its ears first,  
Carefully, so they don't spill over.  
With a sharp whistle slit its belly  
open.  
If there are ashes in it, close your  
eyes

And blow them whichever way the  
wind is pointing.

If there's water, sleeping water,  
Bring the root of a flower that  
hasn't drunk for a month.

When you reach the bones,  
And you haven't got a dog with  
you,  
And you haven't got a pine coffin  
And a cart pulled by oxen to make  
them rattle,  
Slip them quickly under your skin.  
Next time you hunch your  
shoulders  
You'll feel them pressing against  
your own.

It is now pitch-dark.  
Slowly and with patience  
Search for its heart. You will need  
To crawl far into the empty  
heavens  
To hear it beat.

## **Bestiary for the Fingers of My Right Hand**

Thumb, loose tooth of a horse.  
Rooster to his hens.  
Horn of a devil. Fat worm  
They have attached to my flesh  
At the time of my birth.  
It takes four to hold him down,  
Bend him in half, until the bone  
Begins to whimper.

Cut him off. He can take care  
Of himself. Take root in the earth,  
Or go hunting with wolves.

## 2

The second points the way.  
True way. The path crosses the  
earth,  
The moon and some stars.  
Watch, he points further.  
He points to himself.

## 3

The middle one has backache.  
Stiff, still unaccustomed to this  
life;  
An old man at birth. It's about  
something  
That he had and lost,  
That he looks for within my hand,  
The way a dog looks

For fleas  
With a sharp tooth.

**4**

The fourth is a mystery.  
Sometimes as my hand  
Rests on the table  
He jumps by himself  
As though someone called his  
name.

After each bone, finger,  
I come to him, troubled.

**5**

Something stirs in the fifth,  
Something perpetually at the point  
Of birth. Weak and submissive,  
His touch is gentle.  
It weighs a tear.  
It takes the mote out of the eye.

## Fork

This strange thing must have  
crept  
Right out of hell.  
It resembles a bird's foot  
Worn around the cannibal's neck.

As you hold it in your hand,  
As you stab with it into a piece of  
meat,  
It is possible to imagine the rest  
of the bird:  
Its head which like your fist  
Is large, bald, beakless, and blind.

## **Spoon**

An old spoon,  
Chewed  
And licked clean,

Fixing you  
With its evil-eyed  
Stare,

As you lean over  
The soup bowl  
On the table,

To make sure  
Once more  
There is nothing left.

# **Knife**

**1**

Father-confessor  
Of the fat hen  
On the red altar  
Of its throat,  
  
A tongue,  
All alone,  
Bringing the darkness of a mouth  
Now lost.

A single shining eye  
Of a madman—  
If there's a tear in it,  
Whom is it for?

**2**

It is a candle  
It is also a track  
Of crooked letters;  
The knife's mysterious writings.

We go down  
An inner staircase.  
We walk under the earth.  
The knife lights the way.

Through bones of animals,  
Water, beard of a wild boar—  
We go through stones, embers,  
We are after a scent.

### 3

So much darkness  
Everywhere.  
We are in a bag  
Slung  
Over someone's shoulders.

You hear the sound  
Of marching boots.  
You hear the earth  
Answering  
With a hollow thud.

If it's a poem  
You want,  
Take a knife;

A star of solitude,  
It will rise and set in your hand.

## My Shoes

Shoes, secret face of my inner life:  
Two gaping toothless mouths,  
Two partly decomposed animal

skins  
Smelling of mice nests.

My brother and sister who died at birth  
Continuing their existence in you,  
Guiding my life  
Toward their incomprehensible innocence.

What use are books to me  
When in you it is possible to read  
The Gospel of my life on earth  
And still beyond, of things to come?

I want to proclaim the religion  
I have devised for your perfect humility  
And the strange church I am building  
With you as the altar.

Ascetic and maternal, you endure:  
Kin to oxen, to Saints, to condemned men,  
With your mute patience, forming  
The only true likeness of myself.

# **Stone**

Go inside a stone  
That would be my way.  
Let somebody else become a  
dove  
Or gnash with a tiger's tooth.  
I am happy to be a stone.

From the outside the stone is a  
riddle:  
No one knows how to answer it.  
Yet within, it must be cool and  
quiet  
Even though a cow steps on it full  
weight,  
Even though a child throws it in a  
river;  
The stone sinks, slow,  
unperturbed  
To the river bottom  
Where the fishes come to knock  
on it  
And listen.

I have seen sparks fly out  
When two stones are rubbed,  
So perhaps it is not dark inside  
after all;  
Perhaps there is a moon shining  
From somewhere, as though  
behind a hill—

Just enough light to make out  
The strange writings, the star  
charts  
On the inner walls.

## Poem Without a Title

I say to the lead,  
“Why did you let yourself  
Be cast into a bullet?  
Have you forgotten the  
alchemists?  
Have you given up hope  
Of turning into gold?”

Nobody answers.  
Lead. Bullet.  
With names like that  
The sleep is deep and long.

## Concerning My Neighbors, the Hittites

Great are the Hittites.  
Their ears have mice and mice  
have holes.  
Their dogs bury themselves and  
leave the bones  
To guard the house. A single weed

holds all their storms  
Until the spiderwebs spread over  
the heavens.  
There are bits of straw in their  
lakes and rivers  
Looking for drowned men. When a  
camel won't pass  
Through the eye of one of their  
needles,  
They tie a house to its tail. Great  
are the Hittites.  
Their fathers are in cradles, their  
newborn make war.  
To them lead floats, a leaf sinks.  
Their god is the size  
Of a mustard seed so that he can  
be quickly eaten.

•

They also piss against the wind,  
Pour water in a leaky bucket,  
Strike two tears to make fire,  
And have tongues with bones in  
them,  
Bones of a wolf gnawed by lambs.

•

They are also called you only live  
once,  
They are called a small leak

Will sink a great ship, they are  
called  
Don't bite the hand that feeds you,  
they are called  
You can't take it to the grave with  
you.

It's that hum in your left ear,  
A sigh rising from deep within you,  
A dream in which you keep falling  
forever,  
The hour in which you sit up in  
bed  
As though someone has called  
your name.

No one knows why the Hittites  
exist,  
Still, when two are whispering  
One of them is listening.

•

Did they catch the falling knife?  
They caught it like a fly with  
closed mouths.  
Did they balance the last egg?  
They struck the egg with a bone  
so it won't howl.  
Did they wait for dead man's  
shoes?  
The shoes went in at one ear and

out the other.  
Did they wipe the blood from their  
mousetraps?  
They burnt the blood to warm  
themselves.  
Are they cold with no pockets in  
their shrouds?  
If the sky falls, they shall have  
clouds for supper.

What do they have for us  
To put in our pipes and smoke?  
They have the braid of a beautiful  
girl  
That drew a team of cattle  
And the picture of him who slept  
With dogs and rose with fleas  
Searching for its trace in the sky.

•

And so, there are fewer and fewer  
of them now.  
Who wrote their name on paper  
And burnt the paper? Who put  
snake bones  
In their pillows? Who threw nail  
parings  
In their soup? Who made them  
walk  
Under the ladder? Who stuck pins  
In their snapshots?

The king of warts and his brother  
evil eye.

Bone-lazy and her sister rabbit's-  
foot.

Cross-your-fingers and their father  
dog star.

Knock-on-wood and his mother  
hellfire.

Because the tail can't wag the  
cow.

Because the woods can't fly to the  
dove.

Because the stones haven't said  
their last word.

Because dunghills rise and  
empires fall.

•

They are leaving behind  
All the silver spoons  
Found inside their throats at birth,  
A hand they bit because it fed  
them,

Two rats from a ship that is still  
sinking,

A collection of various split hairs,  
The leaf they turned over too late.

•

Here comes a forest in wolf's  
clothing,  
The wise hen bows to the  
umbrella.  
When the bloodshot evening  
meets the bloodshot night,  
They tell each other bloodshot  
tales.

That bare branch over them  
speaks louder than words.  
The moon is worn threadbare.

I repeat: lean days don't come  
singly,  
It takes all kinds to make the sun  
rise.  
The night is each man's castle.  
Don't let the castle out of the bag.  
Wind in the valley, wind in the high  
hills,  
Practice will make this body fit  
this bed.

•

All roads lead  
Out of a sow's ear  
To what's worth  
Two in the bush.

# Invention of Nothing

I didn't notice  
while I wrote here  
that nothing remains of the world  
except my table and chair.

And so I said:  
(to hear myself talk)  
Is this the tavern  
without a glass, wine, or waiter  
where I'm the long-awaited drunk?

The color of nothing is blue.  
I strike it with my left hand and the  
hand disappears.  
Why am I so quiet then  
and so happy?

I climb on the table  
(the chair is gone already)  
I sing through the throat  
of an empty beer bottle.

## Errata

Where it says snow  
read teeth marks of a virgin  
Where it says knife read  
you passed through my bones

like a police whistle  
Where it says table read horse  
Where it says horse read my  
migrant's bundle  
Apples are to remain apples  
Each time a hat appears  
think of Isaac Newton  
reading the Old Testament  
Remove all periods  
They are scars made by words  
I couldn't bring myself to say  
Put a finger over each sunrise  
it will blind you otherwise  
That damn ant is still stirring  
Will there be time left to list  
all errors to replace  
all hands guns owls plates  
all cigars ponds woods and reach  
that beer bottle my greatest  
mistake  
the word I allowed to be written  
when I should have shouted  
her name

## The Bird

A bird calls me  
From a tall tree  
In my dream,

Calls me from the pink twig of  
daylight,  
From the long shadow  
That inches each night closer to  
my heart,  
Calls me from the edge of the  
world.

I give her my dream.  
She dyes it red.  
I give her my breath.  
She turns it into rustling leaves.

She calls me from the highest  
cloud.  
Her chirp  
Like a match flickering  
In a new grave.

•

Bird, shaped  
Like the insides  
Of a yawning mouth.

At daybreak,  
When the sky turns clear and  
lucent  
Like the water in which  
They baptized a small child,  
I climbed toward you.

The earth grew smaller  
underneath.

The howling emptiness  
Chilled my feet,  
And then my heart.

.

Later, I dozed off  
In the woods,  
Nestled in a small clearing  
With the mist for a lover,

And dreamt I had  
The stern eye  
Of that bird  
Watching me sleep.

## Two Riddles

Hangs by a thread—  
Whatever it is. Stripped naked.  
Shivering. Human. Mortal.  
On a thread finer than starlight.

By a power of a feeling,  
Hangs, impossible, unthinkable,  
Between the earth and the sky.  
I, it says. I. I.

And how it boasts,  
That everything that is to be  
known  
About the wind  
Is being revealed to it as it hangs.

.

It goes without saying . . .  
What does? No one knows.  
Goes mysterious, ah funereal,  
Goes for the hell of it.

If it has an opinion,  
It keeps it to itself.  
If it brings tidings,  
It plays dumb, plays dead.

No use trying to pin it down.  
It's elusive, of a retiring habit,  
In a hurry of course, scurrying—  
A blink of an eye and it's gone.

All that's known about it,  
Is that it goes goes  
Without saying.

## Brooms

*for Tomaz, Susan, and George*

1

*Only brooms*  
Know the devil  
Still exists,

That the snow grows whiter  
After a crow has flown over it,  
That a dark dusty corner  
Is the place of dreamers and  
children,

That a broom is also a tree  
In the orchard of the poor,  
That a hanging roach there  
Is a mute dove.

2

Brooms appear in dream books  
As omens of approaching death.  
This is their secret life.  
In public, they act like flat-chested  
old maids  
Preaching temperance.

They are sworn enemies of lyric  
poetry.  
In prison they accompany the  
jailer,  
Enter cells to hear confessions.

Their short end comes down  
When you least expect it.

Left alone behind a door  
Of a condemned tenement,  
They mutter to no one in  
particular,  
Words like *virgin wind moon-*  
*eclipse*,  
And that most sacred of all  
names:  
Hieronymus Bosch.

### 3

In this and in no other manner  
Was the first ancestral broom  
made:  
Namely, they plucked all the  
arrows  
From the bent back of Saint  
Sebastian.  
They tied them with the rope  
On which Judas hung himself.  
Stuck in the stilt  
On which Copernicus  
Touched the morning star . . .

Then the broom was ready  
To leave the monastery.  
The dust welcomed it—  
The old pornographer

Immediately wanted to  
Peek under its skirt.

4

The secret teaching of brooms  
Excludes optimism, the  
consolation  
Of laziness, the astonishing  
wonders  
Of a glass of aged moonshine.

It says: the bones end up under  
the table.  
Bread crumbs have a mind of their  
own.  
The milk is you-know-who's  
semen.  
The mice have the last squeal.

As for the famous business  
Of levitation, I suggest  
remembering:  
There is only one God  
And his prophet is Muhammed.

5

And then finally there's your  
grandmother  
Sweeping the dust of the  
nineteenth century

Into the twentieth, and your  
grandfather plucking  
A straw out of the broom to pick  
his teeth.

Long winter nights.  
Dawns a thousand years deep.  
Kitchen windows like heads  
Bandaged for toothache.

The broom beyond them  
sweeping,  
Tucking the lucent grains of dust  
Into neat pyramids,  
That have tombs in them,

Already sacked by robbers,  
Once, long ago.

## Watermelons

Green Buddhas  
On the fruit stand.  
We eat the smile  
And spit out the teeth.

## **The Place**

They were talking about the war,  
The table still uncleared in front of  
them.  
Across the way, the first window  
Of the evening was already lit.  
He sat, hunched over, quiet,  
The old fear coming over him . . .  
It grew darker. She got up to take  
the plate—  
Now harshly white—to the kitchen.  
Outside in the fields, in the woods,  
A bird spoke in proverbs,  
A Pope went out to meet Attila,  
The ditch was ready for the firing  
squad.

## **Breasts**

I love breasts, hard  
Full breasts, guarded  
By a button.

They come in the night.  
The bestiaries of the ancients  
Which include the unicorn  
Have kept them out.

Pearly, like the east  
An hour before sunrise,  
Two ovens of the only  
Philosopher's stone  
Worth bothering about.

They bring on their nipples  
Beads of inaudible sighs,  
Vowels of delicious clarity  
For the little red schoolhouse of  
our mouths.

Elsewhere, solitude  
Makes another gloomy entry  
In its ledger, misery  
Borrows another cup of rice.

They draw nearer: Animal  
Presence. In the barn  
The milk shivers in the pail.

I like to come up to them  
From underneath, like a kid  
Who climbs on a chair  
To reach a jar of forbidden jam.

Gently, with my lips,  
Loosen the button.  
Have them slip into my hands  
Like two freshly poured beer  
mugs.

I spit on fools who fail to include  
Breasts in their metaphysics,  
Stargazers who have not  
enumerated them  
Among the moons of the earth . . .

They give each finger  
Its true shape, its joy:  
Virgin soap, foam  
On which our hands are cleansed.

And how the tongue honors  
These two sour buns,  
For the tongue is a feather  
Dipped in egg yolk.

I insist that a girl  
Stripped to the waist  
Is the first and last miracle,  
That the old janitor on his  
deathbed  
Who demands to see the breasts  
of his wife  
For one last time  
Is the greatest poet who ever  
lived.

O my sweet yes, my sweet no,  
Look, everyone is asleep on the  
earth.  
Now, in the hush,

Drawing the waist  
Of the one I love to mine,

I will tip each breast  
Like a dark heavy grape  
Into the hive  
Of my drowsy mouth.

## Charles Simic

Charles Simic is a sentence.  
A sentence has a beginning and  
an end.

Is he a simple or compound  
sentence?  
It depends on the weather,  
It depends on the stars above.

What is the subject of the  
sentence?  
The subject is your beloved  
Charles Simic.

How many verbs are there in the  
sentence?  
Eating, sleeping, and fucking are  
some of its verbs.

What is the object of the  
sentence?

The object, my little ones,  
Is not yet in sight.

And who is writing this awkward  
sentence?  
A blackmailer, a girl in love,  
And an applicant for a job.

Will they end with a period or a  
question mark?  
They'll end with an exclamation  
point and an ink spot.

## **Solitude**

There now, where the first crumb  
Falls from the table  
You think no one hears it  
As it hits the floor,

But somewhere already  
The ants are putting on  
Their Quaker hats  
And setting out to visit you.

## **The Chicken Without a Head**

When two times two was three,  
The chicken without a head was  
hatched.  
When the earth was still flat,  
It fell off its edge, daydreaming.  
When there were 13 signs in the  
zodiac,  
It found a dead star for its gizzard.  
When the first fox was getting  
married,  
It taught itself to fly with one wing.  
When all the eggs were still  
golden,  
The clouds in the sky tasted like  
sweet corn.  
When the rain flooded its coop,  
Its wishbone was its ark.  
Ah, when the chicken had only  
itself to roast,  
The lightning was its skewer,  
The thunder its baste and salt.

## 2

The chicken without a head made  
a sigh,  
And then a hailstone out of that  
sigh,  
And the window for the hailstone  
to strike.  
Nine lives it made for itself,  
And nine coats of solitude to

dress them in.  
It made its own shadow. Not true.  
It only made a flea to bite holes in  
the dark.  
Made it all out of nothing. Made a  
needle  
To sew back its broken eggshell.  
Made the lovers naked. Everybody  
else put clothes on them.  
Its father made the knife, but it  
polished the blade,  
Until it threw back its image like a  
funhouse mirror.  
Made it all out of raglets of time.  
Who's to say it'd be happier if it  
didn't?

### 3

Hear the song of a chicken  
without a head  
As it goes scratching in grave dirt.  
A song in which two parallel lines  
Meet at infinity, in which God  
Makes the last of the little apples,  
In which golden fleece is heard  
growing  
On a sad girl's pubes. The song  
Of swearwords dreaming of a  
pure mouth.  
The song of a doornail raised from  
the dead.

The song in half whisper because  
accomplices  
Have been found, because the  
egg's safe  
In the cuckoo's nest. The song  
You wade into until your own hat  
floats.  
A song of contagious laughter.  
A lethal song.  
That's right, the song of dark  
premonitions.

## 4

On a headless evening of a  
headless day  
The chicken on fire and the words  
Around it like a ring of fabulous  
beasts.  
Each night it threw them a bite-  
size portion of its heart.  
The words were hungry, the night  
held the fork.  
Whatever the gallows bird made,  
its head unmade,  
Its long-lost, axed-off head  
Rose into the sky in a balloon of  
question marks.  
Down below the great banquet  
went on:  
The table that supplies itself with  
bread.

A saw that cuts a dream in half.  
Wings so quick they don't get wet  
in heavy rain.  
The egg that mutters to the frying  
pan:  
I swear it by the hair in my yolk,  
There's no such thing as a chicken  
without a head.

## 5

The chicken without a head ran a  
maze,  
Ran half-plucked,  
A serving fork stuck in its back,  
Ran, backward, into the blue of the  
evening.  
Ran upside down,  
Someone huge and red-aproned  
rose in its wake.  
Ran leaving its squinting head far  
behind,  
Its head with a shock of red hair.  
Ran up the church steeple,  
And up the lightning rod on that  
steeple  
For the wind to ruffle its feathers.  
Ran, and is still running this Good  
Friday,  
Between raindrops,  
Hellfoxes on its trail.

# **White**

Out of poverty  
To begin again

With the taste of silence  
On my tongue

Say a word,  
Then listen to it fray

Thread by thread,  
In the fading,

The already vanishing  
Evening light.

•

So clear, it's obscure  
The sense of existing

In this very moment,  
Cheek by jowl with

My shadow on the wall  
With its long, gallowslike,

Contorted neck  
Bloodied by the sunset,

Watching and listening  
To my own heartbeat.

.

This is breath, only breath.  
Think it over, friend.

A shit-house fly weighs  
Twice as much.

But when I tell the world so,  
I'm less by a breath.

The struck match flares up  
And nods in agreement

Before the dark claps it  
With its heavy hands.

.

As strange as a shepherd  
In the Arctic Circle.

Someone like Bo-peep.  
All her sheep are white

And she can't get any sleep  
Over lost sheep,

So she plays a flute  
Which cries Bo-peep,

Which says, poor girl,  
Take care of your sheep.

.

On a late afternoon of snow,  
In a small unlit grocery store

Where a door has just opened  
With a long, painful squeak,

A small boy carries a piece of  
paper  
Between his thumb and forefinger

To the squint-eyed old woman  
Bending low over the counter.

It's that paper I'm remembering,  
And the quiet and the shadows.

.

You're not what you seem to be.  
I'm not what I seem to be.

It's as if we were the unknowing  
Inmates of someone's shadow  
box,

And its curtain was our breath  
And so were the images it caught,

Which were like the world we  
know.

His gloves as gray as the sky

While he held us up by our feet  
Swaying over the earth to and fro.

.

We need a marrying preacher.  
Some crow, praise be,

By the side of the road  
With a bloody beak

Studying a wind-leafed  
Black book

All of whose pages are gold-edged  
And blank,

While we wait, with frost  
thickening  
On our eyelashes.

.

The sky of the desert,  
The heavens of the crucified.

The great white sky  
Of the visionaries.

Its one lone, ghostlike  
Buzzard still hovering,

Writing the long century's  
Obituary column

Over the white city,  
The city of our white nights.

.

Mother gives me to the morning  
On the threshold.

I have the steam of my breath  
For a bride.

The snow on my shoes  
The hems of her wedding dress,

My love always a step ahead,  
Always a blur,

A whiteout  
In the raging, dreamlike storm.

.

As if I shut my eyes  
In order to peek

At the world unobserved,  
And saw

The nameless  
In its glory.

And knew no way  
To speak of it,

And did, nevertheless,  
And then said something else.

.

What are you up to, smart-ass?  
I turn on my tongue's skewer.

What do you baste yourself with?  
I cough bile laced with blood.

Do you use pepper and salt?  
I bite words as they come into my  
mouth.

And how will you know you're  
done?  
My eyes will burn till I see clear.

What will you carve yourself with?  
I'll let my tongue be the knife.

.

In the inky forest,  
In its maziest,

Murkiest scribble  
Of words

And wordless cries,  
I went for a glimpse

Of the blossomlike  
White erasure

Over a huge,  
Furiously crossed-out something.

.

I can't say I'm much of a cook,  
If my heart is in the fire with the  
onions.

I can't say I'm much of a hero,  
If the weight of my head has me  
pinned down.

I can't say I'm in charge here,  
If the flies hang their hats in my  
mouth.

I can't say I am the smart one,  
If I wait for a star to answer me.

Nor can I call myself good-for-nothing.

Thanks to me the worms will have  
their dinner.

•

One has to make do.

Make ends meet,

Odds and ends.

Make no bones about it.

Make a stab in the dark.

Make the hair curl.

Make a door-to-nowhere.

Make a megaphone with one's  
hands,

And call and make do  
With the silence answering.

•

Then all's well and white  
All day and all night.

The highways are snowbound.  
The forest paths are hushed.

The power lines have fallen.  
The windows are dark.

Nothing but starlight  
And the snow's dim light

And the wind wildly  
Preaching in the pine tree.

.

In an unknown year  
Of an evil-eyed century,

On a day of biting wind,  
A tiny old woman,

One foot in the grave,  
Met a boy playing hooky.

She offered him a sugar cube  
In a hand so wizened

His tongue leapt back in fear  
Saying thanks.

.

Do you take this line  
Stretching to infinity?

I take this white paper  
Lying still before me.

Do you take this ring  
Of unknown circumference?

I take this breath  
Slipping in and out of it.

Then you may kiss the place  
Where your pencil went faint.

.

Had to get through me  
On its long, long trek

To and from nowhere.  
Woe to every heartbeat

That stood in its way,  
Woe to every thought . . .

Time's white ants hurrying,  
The rustle of their feet.

Gravedigger ants.  
Village idiot ants.

.

I haven't budged from the start.  
Five fingers crumpled up

Over the blank page  
As if composing a love letter,

Do you hear the white night  
Touching down?

I hear its ear trumpets,  
The holy escutcheons

Turning golden  
In the dying light.

.

Psst. The white hair  
Fallen from my head

On the writing paper  
Momentarily anonymous.

I had to bend down low  
And put my eye next to it

To make sure,  
Then nudge it, ever so slowly

With the long tip of my pencil  
Over the edge of the table.

## **What the White Had to Say**

Because I'm nothing you can  
name,  
I knew you long before you knew  
me.  
Some days you keep your hand  
closed  
As if you've caught me,  
But it's only a fly you've got there.  
No use calling on angels and  
devils  
In the middle of the night.  
Go ahead, squint into the dregs on  
the bottom  
Of your coffee cup, for all I care.  
I do not answer to your hocus-  
pocus,  
For I'm nearer to you than your  
own breath.  
One sun shines on us both  
Through the slit in your eyelids.  
Your empty hand shows me off  
To the four white walls of your  
room,

While with my horse's tail I wave  
the fly away,  
But there's no tail, and the fly  
Is a white thought buzzing in your  
head.

Because I'm nothing you'll ever  
name,  
You sharpen your tongue hoping  
to skewer me.  
The ear that rose in the night  
To hear the truth inside the word  
*love*.  
Listen to this, my beloved,  
I'm the great nothing that tucked  
you in,  
The finger placed softly on your  
lips  
That made you sit up in bed wide  
awake.  
Still, this riddle comes with no  
answer.  
The same mother left us on your  
doorstep.  
The same high ceiling made us  
insomniac.  
Late-night piano picking out blue  
notes  
In the empty ballroom down the  
hall,  
We've fallen in the gaps between  
the notes.

And still you want me to say  
more?  
Time has stopped. Your shadow,  
With its gallowslike head and  
neck,  
Has not stirred on the wall.

## The Partial Explanation

Seems like a long time  
Since the waiter took my order.  
Grimy little luncheonette,  
The snow falling outside.

Seems like it has grown darker  
Since I last heard the kitchen door  
Behind my back  
Since I last noticed  
Anyone pass on the street.

A glass of ice water  
Keeps me company  
At this table I chose myself  
Upon entering.

And a longing,  
Incredible longing  
To eavesdrop  
On the conversation  
Of cooks.

# The Lesson

It occurs to me now  
that all these years  
I have been  
the idiot pupil  
of a practical joker.

Diligently  
and with foolish reverence  
I wrote down  
what I took to be  
his wise pronouncements  
concerning  
my life on earth.  
Like a parrot  
I rattled off the dates  
of wars and revolutions.  
I rejoiced  
at the death of my tormentors.  
I even became convinced  
that their number  
was diminishing.

It seemed to me  
that gradually  
my teacher was revealing to me  
a pattern,  
that what I was being told  
was an intricate plot  
of a picaresque novel  
in installments,

the last pages of which  
would be given over  
entirely  
to lyrical evocations  
of nature.

Unfortunately,  
with time,  
I began to detect in myself  
an inability  
to forget even  
the most trivial detail.  
I lingered more and more  
over the beginnings:  
The haircut of a soldier  
who was urinating  
against our fence;  
shadows of trees on the ceiling,  
the day  
my mother and I  
had nothing to eat . . .  
Somehow,  
I couldn't get past  
that prison train  
that kept waking me up  
every night.  
I couldn't get that whistle  
that rumble  
out of my head . . .

In this classroom  
austerely furnished

by my insomnia,  
at the desk consisting  
of my two knees,  
for the first time  
in this long and terrifying  
apprenticeship,  
I burst out laughing.  
Forgive me, all of you!  
At the memory of my uncle  
charging a barricade  
with a homemade bomb,  
I burst out laughing.

## A Landscape with Crutches

So many crutches. Now even the  
daylight  
Needs one, even the smoke  
As it goes up. And the shacks—  
One per customer—they move off  
In a single file with difficulty,

I said, with a hell of an effort . . .  
And the trees behind them about  
to stumble,  
And the ants on their toy crutches,  
And the wind on its ghost crutch.

I can't get any peace around here:  
The bread on its artificial legs,  
A headless doll in a wheelchair,

And my mother, mind you, using  
Two knives for crutches as she  
squats to pee.

## Help Wanted

They ask for a knife  
I come running  
They need a lamb  
I introduce myself as the lamb

A thousand sincere apologies  
It seems they require some rat  
poison  
They require a shepherd  
For their flock of black widows

Luckily I've brought my bloody  
Letters of recommendation  
I've brought my death certificate  
Signed and notarized

But they've changed their minds  
again  
Now they want a songbird, a bit of  
springtime  
They want a woman  
To soap and kiss their balls

It's one of my many talents  
(I assure them)

Chirping and whistling like an  
aviary  
Spreading the cheeks of my ass

## Animal Acts

A bear who eats with a silver  
spoon.  
Two apes adept at grave-digging.  
Rats who do calculus.  
A police dog who copulates with a  
woman,  
Who takes undertaker's  
measurements.

A bedbug who suffers, who has  
doubts  
About his existence. The  
miraculous  
Laughing dove. A thousand-year-  
old turtle  
Playing billiards. A chicken who  
Cuts his own throat, who bleeds.

The trainer with his sugar cubes,  
With his chair and whip. The  
evenings  
When they all huddle in a cage,  
Smoking cheap cigars, lazily  
Marking the cards in the new  
deck.

## **Charon's Cosmology**

With only his dim lantern  
To tell him where he is  
And every time a mountain  
Of fresh corpses to load up

Take them to the other side  
Where there are plenty more  
I'd say by now he must be  
confused  
As to which side is which

I'd say it doesn't matter  
No one complains he's got  
Their pockets to go through  
In one a crust of bread in another  
a sausage

Once in a long while a mirror  
Or a book which he throws  
Overboard into the dark river  
Swift and cold and deep

## **The Ballad of the Wheel**

so that's what it's like to be a  
wheel  
so that's what it's like to be tied to  
one of its spokes

while the rim screeches while the  
axle grinds  
so that's what it's like to have the  
earth and heaven confused  
to speak of the stars on the road  
of stones churning in the icy sky  
to suffer as the wheel suffers  
to bear its unimaginable weight

if only it were a honing wheel  
I would have its sparks to see by  
if only it were a millstone  
I would have bread to keep my  
mouth busy  
if only it were a roulette wheel  
my left eye would watch its right  
dance in it

so that's what it's like  
to be chained to the wounded rib  
of a wheel  
to move as the hearse moves  
to move as the lumber truck  
moves  
down the mountains at night

.

what do you think my love  
while the wheel turns

I think of the horse out in front  
how the snowflakes are caught in  
his mane  
how he shakes his beautiful  
blindfolded head  
I think how in the springtime  
two birds are pulling us along as  
they fly  
how one bird is a crow

and the other a swallow  
I think how in the summertime  
there's no one out there  
except the clouds in the blue sky  
except the dusk in the blue sky  
I think how in autumn  
there's a man harnessed out there  
a bearded man with the bit stuck  
in his mouth  
a hunchback with a blanket over  
his shoulders  
hauling the wheel  
heavy as the earth

.

don't you hear I say don't you hear  
the wheel talks as it turns  
I have the impression that it's  
hugging me closer  
that it has maternal instincts  
that it's telling me a bedtime story

that it knows the way home  
that I grit my teeth just like my  
father

I have the impression  
that it whispers to me  
how all I have to do  
to stop its turning  
is to hold my breath

## A Wall

That's the only image  
That turns up.

A wall all by itself,  
Poorly lit, beckoning,  
But no sense of the room,  
Not even a hint  
Of why it is I remember  
So little and so clearly:

The fly I was watching,  
The details of its wings  
Glowing like turquoise.  
Its feet, to my amusement  
Following a minute crack—  
An eternity  
Around that simple event.

And nothing else; and nowhere  
To go back to;  
And no one else  
As far as I know to verify.

## The Terms

A child crying in the night  
Across the street  
In one of the many dark windows.  
That, too, to get used to,  
Make part of your life.  
Like this book of astronomy  
Which you open with equal  
apprehension  
By the light of table lamp,  
And your birdlike shadow on the  
wall.  
A sleepless witness at the base  
Of this expanding immensity,  
Simultaneous in this moment  
With all of its empty spaces,  
Listening to a child crying in the  
night  
With a hope,  
It will go on crying a little longer.

# Eyes Fastened with Pins

How much death works,  
No one knows what a long  
Day he puts in. The little  
Wife always alone  
Ironing death's laundry.  
The beautiful daughters  
Setting death's supper table.  
The neighbors playing  
Pinochle in the backyard  
Or just sitting on the steps  
Drinking beer. Death,  
Meanwhile, in a strange  
Part of town looking for  
Someone with a bad cough,  
But the address is somehow  
wrong,  
Even death can't figure it out  
Among all the locked doors . . .  
And the rain beginning to fall.  
Long windy night ahead.  
Death with not even a newspaper  
To cover his head, not even  
A dime to call the one pining away,  
Undressing slowly, sleepily,  
And stretching naked  
On death's side of the bed.

## The Prisoner

He is thinking of us.  
These leaves, their lazy rustle  
That made us sleepy after lunch  
So we had to lie down.

He considers my hand on her  
breast,  
Her closed eyelids, her moist lips  
Against my forehead, and the  
shadows of trees  
Hovering on the ceiling.

It's been so long. He has trouble  
Deciding what else is there.  
And all along the suspicion  
That we do not exist.

## Empire of Dreams

On the first page of my  
dreambook  
It's always evening  
In an occupied country.  
Hour before the curfew.  
A small provincial city.  
The houses all dark.  
The storefronts gutted.

I am on a street corner  
Where I shouldn't be.  
Alone and coatless  
I have gone out to look  
For a black dog who answers to  
my whistle.  
I have a kind of Halloween mask  
Which I am afraid to put on.

## Prodigy

I grew up bent over  
a chessboard.

I loved the word *endgame*.

All my cousins looked worried.

It was a small house  
near a Roman graveyard.  
Planes and tanks  
shook its windowpanes.

A retired professor of astronomy  
taught me how to play.

That must have been in 1944 .

In the set we were using,  
the paint had almost chipped off  
the black pieces.

The white King was missing  
and had to be substituted for.

I'm told but do not believe  
that that summer I witnessed  
men hung from telephone poles.

I remember my mother  
blindfolding me a lot.  
She had a way of tucking my head  
suddenly under her overcoat.

In chess, too, the professor told  
me,  
the masters play blindfolded,  
the great ones on several boards  
at the same time.

## **Baby Pictures of Famous Dictators**

The epoch of a streetcar drawn by  
horses,  
The organ-grinder and his  
monkey.  
Women with parasols. Little kids  
in rowboats  
Photographed against a  
cardboard backdrop depicting an

idyllic sunset  
At the fairgrounds where they all  
went to see  
The two-headed calf, the bearded  
Fat lady who dances the dance of  
seven veils.

And the great famine raging  
through India . . .  
Fortunetelling white rat pulling a  
card out of a shoebox  
While Edison worries over the  
lightbulb,  
And the first model of the sewing  
machine  
Is delivered in a pushcart  
To a modest white-fenced home  
in the suburbs,

Where there are always a couple  
of infants  
Posing for the camera in their  
sailors' suits,  
Out there in the garden overgrown  
with shrubs.  
Lovable little mugs smiling faintly  
toward  
The new century. Innocent. Why  
not?  
All of them like ragdolls of the  
period  
With those chubby porcelain

heads  
That shut their long eyelashes as  
you lay them down.

In a kind of perpetual summer  
twilight . . .  
One can even make out the  
shadow of the tripod and the  
black hood  
That must have been quivering in  
the breeze.  
One assumes that they all stayed  
up late squinting at the stars,  
And were carried off to bed by  
their mothers and big sisters.  
While the dogs remained behind:  
Pedigreed bitches pregnant with  
bloodhounds.

## Shirt

To get into it  
As it lies  
Crumpled on the floor  
Without disturbing a single crease

Respectful  
Of the way I threw it down  
Last night  
The way it happened to land

Almost managing  
The impossible contortions  
Doubling back now  
Through a knotted sleeve

## **Begotten of the Spleen**

The Virgin Mother walked  
barefoot  
Among the land mines.  
She carried an old man in her  
arms  
Like a howling babe.

The earth was an old people's  
home.  
Judas was the night nurse,  
Emptying bedpans into the river  
Jordan,  
Tying people on a dog chain.

The old man had two stumps for  
legs.  
St. Peter came pushing a cart  
Loaded with flying carpets.  
They were not flying carpets.

They were piles of bloody diapers.  
The Magi stood around  
Cleaning their nails with bayonets.

The old man gave little Mary  
Magdalene

A broken piece of a mirror.  
She hid in the church outhouse.  
When she got thirsty she licked  
The steam off the glass.

That leaves Joseph. Poor Joseph,  
Standing naked in the snow.  
He only had a rat  
To load his suitcases on.

The rat wouldn't run into its hole.  
Even when the searchlights came  
on  
Up in the guard towers  
And caught them standing there.

## Toy Factory

My mother works here,  
And so does my father.

It's the night shift.  
At the assembly line,  
They wind toys up  
To inspect their springs.

The seven toy members  
Of the firing squad

Point their rifles,  
And lower them quickly.

The one being shot at  
Falls and gets up,  
Falls and gets up.  
His blindfold is just painted on.

The toy gravediggers  
Don't work so well.  
Their spades are heavy,  
Their spades are much too heavy.

Perhaps that's how  
It's supposed to be?

## **The Little Tear Gland That Says**

Then there was Johann,  
the carousel horse—  
except he wasn't really a carousel  
horse.

He grew up in “the naive realism  
of the Wolffian school  
which without close scrutiny  
regards  
logical necessity and reality as  
identical.”

On Sundays, his parents took him  
to the undertaker's for cookies.  
“All these people flying in their  
dreams,”  
he thought.

Standing before the Great Dark  
Night of History,  
a picture of innocence  
held together by his mother's  
safety pins,  
short and bowlegged.

Cool reflection soon showed  
there were openings among the  
signatories of  
death sentences . . .  
plus free high leather boots that  
squeak.

On his entrance exam he wrote:  
“The act of torture consists of  
various strategies  
meant to increase the imagination  
of the *Homo sapiens*.”

And then . . . the Viennese waltz.

# The Stream

*for Russ Banks*

The ear threading  
the eye

all night long  
the ear  
on a long errand  
for the eye

through the thickening  
pine  
white birch  
over no-man's-land

pebbles  
is it  
compact in their anonymity  
their gravity

accidents of location  
abstract necessity

water  
which takes such pains

to convince me  
it is flowing

•

Summoning me  
to be  
two places at once

to drift  
the length  
of its chill  
its ache

hand white  
at the knuckles

live bait  
the old hide-and-seek  
in and out  
of the swirl

luminous verb  
carnivorous verb  
innocent as sand  
under its blows

•

An insomnia as big  
as the stars'

always  
on the brink—  
as it were  
of some deeper utterance

some harsher  
reckoning

at daybreak  
lightly  
oh so lightly  
when she brushes  
against me

and the hems of her long skirt  
go trailing

a bit longer

Nothing  
that comes to nothing  
for company

comes the way a hurt  
the way a thought  
comes

comes and keeps coming

all night meditating  
on what she asks of me  
when she doesn't

when I hear myself say  
she doesn't

## Furniture Mover

Ah the great  
the venerable  
whoever he is

ahead of me  
huge load  
terrific backache

wherever  
a chair's waiting  
meadow  
sky  
beckoning

he is the one  
that's been  
there  
without instructions  
and for no wages

a huge load  
on his back  
and under his arm  
thus  
always

all in place  
perfect  
just as it was  
sweet home

at the address  
I never even dreamed of  
the address  
I'm already changing

in a hurry  
to overtake him  
to arrive  
not ahead

but just as  
he sets down  
the table  
the thousand-year-old  
bread crumbs

I used to  
claim  
I was part  
of his load

high up there  
roped safely  
with the junk  
the eviction notices

I used to  
prophesy  
he'll stumble  
by and by

No luck—  
oh  
Mr. Furniture Mover  
on my knees

let me come  
for once  
early  
to where it's vacant

you still  
on the stairs  
wheezing  
between floors

and me behind the door  
in the gloom  
I think I would  
let you do

what you must

## Elegy

Note  
as it gets darker

that little  
can be ascertained  
of the particulars  
and of their true  
magnitudes

note  
the increasing  
unreliability  
of vision  
though one thing may appear  
more or less  
familiar  
than another

disengaged  
from reference  
as they are  
in the deepening  
gloom

nothing to do  
but sit  
and abide  
depending on memory  
to provide  
the vague outline  
the theory  
of where we are  
tonight

and why  
we can see  
so little  
    of each other  
and soon  
    will be  
even less  
    able

in this starless  
summer night  
    windy and cold

at the table  
brought out  
    hours ago  
under a huge ash tree  
    two chairs  
two ambiguous figures  
    each one relying  
on the other  
to remain faithful  
    now  
that one can leave  
    without the other one  
knowing

this late  
in what only recently was  
    a garden  
a festive occasion

elaborately planned  
for two lovers

in the open air  
at the end  
of a dead-end  
road  
rarely traveled

o love

## **Note Slipped Under a Door**

I saw a high window struck blind  
By the late afternoon sunlight.

I saw a towel  
With many dark fingerprints  
Hanging in the kitchen.

I saw an old apple tree,  
A shawl of wind over its  
shoulders,  
Inch its lonely way  
Toward the barren hills.

I saw an unmade bed  
And felt the cold of its sheets.

I saw a fly soaked in pitch  
Of the coming night

Watching me because it couldn't  
get out.

I saw stones that had come  
From a great purple distance  
Huddle around the front door.

## Grocery

Figure or figures unknown  
Keep a store  
Keep it open  
Nights and all day Sunday

Half of what they sell  
Will kill you  
The other half  
Makes you go back for more

Too cheap to turn on the lights  
Hard to tell what it is  
They've got on the counter  
What it is you're paying for

All the rigors  
All the solemnities  
Of a brass scale imperceptibly  
quivering  
In the early winter dusk

One of its pans  
For their innards  
The other one for yours—  
And yours heavier

## Classic Ballroom Dances

Grandmothers who wring the  
necks  
Of chickens; old nuns  
With names like Theresa,  
Marianne,  
Who pull schoolboys by the ear;

The intricate steps of pickpockets  
Working the crowd of the curious  
At the scene of an accident; the  
slow shuffle  
Of the evangelist with a sandwich  
board;

The hesitation of the early-  
morning customer  
Peeking through the window grille  
Of a pawnshop; the weave of a  
little kid  
Who is walking to school with  
eyes closed;

And the ancient lovers, cheek to  
cheek,

On the dance floor of the Union  
Hall,  
Where they also hold charity  
raffles  
On rainy Monday nights of an  
eternal November.

## Progress Report

And how are the rats doing in the  
maze?  
The gray one in a baggy fur coat  
Appears dazed, the rest squeeze  
past him  
Biting and squealing.

A pretty young attendant has him  
by the tail.  
She is going to slit him open.  
The blade glints and so do the  
beads  
Of perspiration on her forehead.

His cousins are still running in  
circles.  
The damp, foul-smelling sewer  
Where they nuzzled their mother's  
teat  
Is what they hope to see at the  
next turn.

Already she's yanked his heart out,  
And he doesn't know what for?  
Neither does she at this moment  
Watching his eyes glaze, his  
whiskers twitch.

## **Winter Night**

The church is an iceberg.

It's the wind. It must be blowing  
tonight  
Out of those galactic orchards,  
Their Copernican pits and stones.

The monster created by the mad  
Dr. Frankenstein  
Sailed for the New World,  
And ended up some place like  
New Hampshire.

Actually, it's just a local drunk,  
Knocking with a snow shovel,  
Wanting to go in and warm  
himself.

An iceberg, the book says, is a  
large drifting  
Piece of ice, broken off a glacier.

## **The Cold**

As if in a presence of an  
intelligence  
Concentrating. I thought myself  
Scrutinized and measured closely  
By the sky and the earth,

And then algebraized and entered  
In a notebook page blank and  
white,  
Except for the faint blue lines  
Which might have been bars,

For I kept walking and walking,  
And it got darker and then there  
was  
A flicker of a light or two  
Far above and beyond my cage.

## **Devotions**

*for Michael Anania*

The hundred-year-old servants  
Are polishing the family silver,  
And recalling the little master  
dressed as a girl  
Peeing in a chamber pot.

Now he is away hunting with  
Madame.  
The reverend dropped by this  
afternoon  
And inquired amiably after them.  
His pink fingers were like  
squirming piglets.

Even the Siamese cats like to sit  
and gaze,  
On days when it rains and the fire  
is lit,  
At the grandfather with waxed  
mustache-tips  
Scowling out of the heavy picture  
frame.

They were quick to learn respect  
And what is expected of them,  
these former  
Farm boys and girls stealing  
glances  
At themselves in spoons large and  
small.

## Cold Blue Tinge

The pink-cheeked Jesus  
Thumbtacked above  
The cold gas stove,  
And the boy sitting on the piss pot

Blowing soap bubbles  
For the black kitten to catch.

Very peaceful, except  
There's a faint moan  
From the next room.  
His mother's asking  
For some more pills,  
But there's no reply.  
The bubbles are quiet,  
And kitten is sleepy.

All his brothers and sisters  
Have been drowned.  
He'll have a long life, though,  
Catching mice for the baker,  
And the undertaker.

## The Writings of the Mystics

On the counter among many  
Much-used books,  
The rare one you must own  
Immediately, the one  
That makes your heart race

As you wait for small change  
With a silly grin  
You'll take to the street,  
And later, past the landlady  
Watching you wipe your shoes,

Then, up to the rented room  
Which neighbors the one  
Of a nightclub waitress  
Who's shaving her legs  
With a door partly open,

While you turn to the first page  
Which speaks of a presentiment  
Of a higher existence  
In things familiar and drab . . .

In a house soon to be torn down,  
Suddenly hushed, and  
otherworldly . . .  
You have to whisper your own  
name,  
And the words of the hermit,

Since it must be long past dinner,  
The one they ate quickly,  
Happy that your small portion  
Went to the three-legged dog.

## Window Washer

And again the screech of the  
scaffold  
High up there where all our  
thoughts converge:

Lightheaded, hung  
By a leather strap,

Twenty stories up  
In the chill of late November  
Wiping the grime  
Off the pane, the many windows

Which have no way of opening,  
Tinted windows mirroring the  
clouds  
That are like equestrian statues,  
Phantom liberators with sabers  
raised

Before these dark offices,  
And their anonymous multitudes  
Bent over this day's  
Wondrously useless labor.

## Gallows Etiquette

Our sainted great-great-  
Grandmothers  
Used to sit and knit  
Under the gallows.

No one remembers what it was  
They were knitting  
And what happened when the ball  
of yarn

Rolled out of their laps  
And had to be retrieved.

One pictures the hooded  
executioner  
And his pasty-faced victim  
Interrupting their grim business  
To come quickly to their aid.

Confirmed pessimists  
And other party poopers  
Categorically reject  
Such far-fetched notions  
Of gallows etiquette.

## In Midsummer Quiet

Ariadne's bird,  
That lone  
Whippoorwill.

Ball of twilight thread  
Unraveling furtively.  
Tawny thread,  
Raw, pink the thread end.

A claw or two also  
To pare, snip . . .  
After which it sits still  
For the stream to explain why it  
shivers

So.

Resuming, farther on,  
Intermittently,  
By the barn  
Where the first stars are—  
In quotation marks,  
As it were—O phantom

Bird!

Dreaming of my own puzzles  
And mazes.

## Peaceful Trees

*in memory of M. N.*

All shivers,  
Dear friends.

Is it for me  
You keep still?

Not a rustle  
To remind me—

Quietly, the healing  
Spreads—

A deep shade  
Over each face.

.

So many leaves,  
And not one  
Lately stirring.

So many already  
Tongue-shaped,  
Tip-of-the-tongue-shaped.

Oh the sweet speech of trees  
In the evening breeze  
Of some other summer.  
Speech like sudden  
Rustle of raindrops  
Out of the high, pitch-blue  
Heavens.

Lofty ones,  
Do you shudder  
When the chain saw  
Cuts one of you?

Would it soothe,  
If for all you voiceless,  
To high heavens  
The one with the rope round his  
neck

Were to plead?

.

Forgive me,

For the conjecture  
I'm prone to—

Restless as I am  
Before you windless,

Whispering  
To the Master Whisperers

Of their own  
Early-evening silences.

## **My Beloved**

*after D. Khrams*

In the fine print of her face  
Her eyes are two loopholes.  
No, let me start again.  
Her eyes are flies in milk,  
Her eyes are baby Draculas.

To hell with her eyes.  
Let me tell you about her mouth.  
Her mouth's the red cottage  
Where the wolf ate grandma.

Ah, forget about her mouth,  
Let me talk about her breasts.  
I get a peek at them now and then  
And even that's more than enough  
To make me lose my head,  
So I better tell you about her legs.

When she crosses them on the sofa  
It's like the jailer unwrapping a parcel  
And in that parcel is a Christmas cake  
And in that cake a sweet little file  
That gasps her name as it files my chains.

## Hurricane Season

Just as the world was ending  
We fell in love,  
Immoderately. I had a pair of

Blue pinstripe trousers  
Impeccably pressed  
Against misfortune;

You had a pair of silver,  
Spiked-heeled shoes,  
And a peekaboo blouse.

We looked swank kissing  
While reflected in a pawnshop  
window:  
Banjos and fiddles around us,

Even a gleaming tuba. I said,  
Two phosphorescent minute  
hands  
Against the Unmeasurables,

Geniuses when it came to  
Undressing each other  
By slow tantalizing degrees . . .

That happened in a crepuscular  
hotel  
That had seen better days,  
Across from some sort of august  
state institution,

Rain-blurred  
With its couple of fake  
Egyptian stone lions.

## Note

A rat came on stage  
During the performance  
Of the school Christmas play.  
Mary let out a scream  
And dropped the infant

On Joseph's foot.  
The three Magi remained  
Frozen  
In their colorful robes.  
You could hear a pin drop  
As the rat surveyed the manger  
Momentarily  
Before proceeding to the wings  
Where someone hit him,  
In earnest,  
Once, and then twice more,  
With a heavy object.

## History

On a gray evening  
Of a gray century,  
I ate an apple  
While no one was looking.

A small, sour apple  
The color of wood fire  
Which I first wiped  
On my sleeve.

Then I stretched my legs  
As far as they'd go,  
Said to myself  
Why not close my eyes now

Before the late  
World News and Weather.

## **Strictly Bucolic**

*for Mark and Jules*

Are these mellifluous sheep,  
And these the meadows made  
twice melliferous by their  
bleating?

Is that the famous mechanical  
windup shepherd  
Who comes with instructions and  
service manual?

This must be the regulation white  
fleece  
Bleached and starched to  
perfection,  
And we could be posing for our  
first communion pictures,  
Except for the nasty horns.

I am beginning to think this might  
be  
The Angelic Breeders  
Association's  
Millennial Company Picnic (all  
expenses paid)

With a few large black dogs as  
special guests.

These dogs serve as ushers and  
usherettes.  
They're always studying the rules,  
The exigencies of proper  
deportment  
When they're not reading  
Theocritus,

Or wagging their tails at the  
approach of  
Theodora. Or is it Theodosius? Or  
even Theodoric?  
They're theomorphic, of course.  
They theologize.  
Theogony is their favorite. They  
also love theomachy.

Now they hand out the blue  
ribbons.  
Ah, there's one for everyone!  
Plus the cauldrons of stinking  
cabbage and boiled turnips  
Which don't figure in this idyll.

## Crows

Just so that each stark,  
Spiked twig,

May be even more fierce  
With significance,

There are these birds  
As further harbingers  
Of the coming wintry reduction  
To sign and enigma:

The impatient way  
In which they shook snow  
Off their wings,  
And then remained, inexplicably

Thus, wings half-open,  
Making two large algebraic X's  
As if for emphasis,  
Or in the mockery of . . .

## February

The one who lights the wood  
stove  
Gets up in the dark.

How cold the iron is to the hand  
Groping to open the flue,  
The hand that will draw back  
At the roar of the wind outside.

The wood that no longer smells of  
the woods;

The wood that smells of rats and  
mice—  
And the matches that are always  
so loud  
In the glacial stillness.

By its flare you'll see her squat;  
Gaunt, wide-eyed;  
Her lips saying the stark headlines  
Going up in flames.

## Punch Minus Judy

Where the elevated subway slows  
down,  
A row of broken windows,  
Only a single one still intact  
Open and thickly curtained.

That's where I once saw a thin  
arm  
Slip out between the slits,  
The hand open to feel for drops of  
rain,  
Or to give us a papal blessing.

Another time, there were two—  
Chopped off at the elbows  
Raising a small, naked baby  
For a breath of evening air

Above the sweltering street  
With a gang of men partying  
Out of brown paper bags,  
One limping off, seemingly, in a  
huff.

## Austerities

From the heel  
Of a half-loaf  
Of black bread,  
They made a child's head.

Child, they said,  
We've nothing for eyes,  
Nothing to spare for ears  
And nose.

Just a knife  
To make a slit  
Where your mouth  
Ought to be.

You can grin,  
You can eat,  
Spit the crumbs  
Into our faces.

# Eastern European Cooking

While Marquis de Sade had  
himself buggered—  
Oh just around the time the Turks  
Were roasting my ancestors on  
spits,  
Goethe wrote The Sorrows of  
Young Werther.

It was chilly, raw, down-in-the-mouth  
We were slurping bean soup thick  
with smoked sausage,  
On Second Avenue, where years  
before I saw an old horse  
Pull a wagon piled up high with  
flophouse mattresses.

Anyway, as I was telling my uncle  
Boris,  
With my mouth full of pig's feet  
and wine:  
“While they were holding hands  
and sighing under parasols,  
We were being hung by our  
tongues.”

“I make no distinction between  
scum,”  
He said, and he meant everybody,  
Us and them: A breed of

murderers' helpers,  
Evil-smelling torturers'  
apprentices.

Which called for another bottle of  
Hungarian wine,  
And some dumplings stuffed with  
prunes,  
Which we devoured in silence  
While the Turks went on beating  
their cymbals and drums.

Luckily we had this Transylvanian  
waiter,  
A defrocked priest, ex-dancing  
school instructor,  
Regarding whose excellence we  
were in complete agreement  
Since he didn't forget the  
toothpicks with our bill.

## **My Weariness of Epic Proportions**

I like it when  
Achilles  
Gets killed  
And even his buddy Patroclus—  
And that hothead Hector—  
And the whole Greek and Trojan

*Jeunesse dorée*  
Are more or less  
Expertly slaughtered  
So there's finally  
Peace and quiet  
(The gods having momentarily  
Shut up)  
One can hear  
A bird sing  
And a daughter ask her mother  
Whether she can go to the well  
And of course she can  
By that lovely little path  
That winds through  
The olive orchard

## **Madonnas Touched Up with Goatees**

Most ancient Metaphysics (poor  
Metaphysics!),  
All decked out in imitation jewelry.  
We went for a stroll, arm in arm,  
smooching in public  
Despite the difference in ages.

It's still the nineteenth century, she  
whispered.  
We were in a knife-fighting  
neighborhood

Among some rundown relics of  
the Industrial Revolution.  
Just a little farther, she assured  
me,  
In the back of a certain candy  
store only she knew about,  
The customers were engrossed in  
the *Phenomenology of*  
*the Spirit.*

It's long past midnight, my dove,  
my angel!  
We'd better be careful, I thought.  
There were young hoods on street  
corners  
With crosses and iron studs on  
their leather jackets.  
They all looked like they'd read  
Darwin and that  
    madman Pavlov,  
And were about to ask us for a  
light.

## Midpoint

No sooner had I left A.  
Than I started doubting its  
existence:  
Its streets and noisy crowds;  
Its famous all-night cafés and  
prisons.

It was dinnertime. The bakeries  
were closing:  
Their shelves empty and white  
with flour.  
The grocers were lowering their  
iron grilles.  
A lovely young woman was buying  
the last casaba melon.

Even the back alley where I was  
born  
Blurs, dims . . . O rooftops!  
Armadas of bedsheets and shirts  
In the blustery, crimson dusk . . .

.

B. at which I am destined  
To arrive by and by  
Doesn't exist now. Hurriedly  
They're building it for my arrival,

And on that day it will be ready:  
Its streets and noisy crowds . . .  
Even the schoolhouse where I first  
Forged my father's signature . . .

Knowing that on the day  
Of my departure  
It will vanish forever  
Just as A. did.

II

## *from UNENDING BLUES*

### **December**

It snows  
and still the derelicts  
go  
carrying sandwich boards—

one proclaiming  
the end of the world  
the other  
the rates of a local barbershop

### **Toward Nightfall**

*for Don and Jane*

The weight of tragic events  
On everyone's back,  
Just as tragedy  
In the proper Greek sense

Was thought impossible  
To compose in our day.

There were scaffolds,  
Makeshift stages,  
Puny figures on them,  
Like small indistinct animals  
Caught in the headlights  
Crossing the road way ahead,

In the gray twilight  
That went on hesitating  
On the verge of a huge  
Starless autumn night.  
One could've been in  
The back of an open truck  
Hunkering because of  
The speed and chill.

One could've been walking  
With a sidelong glance  
At the many troubling shapes  
The bare trees made—  
Like those about to shriek,  
But finding themselves unable  
To utter a word now.

One could've been in  
One of these dying mill towns  
Inside a small dim grocery  
When the news broke.  
One would've drawn near the radio

With the one many months  
pregnant  
Who serves there at that hour.

Was there a smell of  
Spilled blood in the air,  
Or was it that other,  
Much finer scent—of fear,  
The fear of approaching death  
One met on the empty street?

Monsters on movie posters, too,  
Prominently displayed.  
Then, six factory girls,  
Arm in arm, laughing  
As if they've been drinking.  
At the very least, one  
Could've been one of them.

The one with a mouth  
Painted bright red,  
Who feels out of sorts,  
For no reason, very pale,  
And so, excusing herself,  
Vanishes where it says  
Rooms for Rent,  
And immediately goes to bed,  
Fully dressed, only

To lie with eyes open,  
Trembling, despite the covers.  
It's just a bad chill,

She keeps telling herself  
Not having seen the papers  
Which the landlord has the dog  
Bring from the front porch.

The old man never learned  
To read well, and so  
Reads on in that half-whisper,  
And in that half-light  
Verging on the dark,  
About that day's tragedies  
Which supposedly are not  
Tragedies in the absence of  
Figures endowed with  
Classic nobility of soul.

## **Early Evening Algebra**

The madwoman went marking X's  
With a piece of school chalk  
On the backs of unsuspecting  
Hand-holding, homebound  
couples.

It was winter. It was dark already.  
One could not see her face  
Bundled up as she was and  
furtive.  
She went as if windswept, as if  
crow-winged.

The chalk must have been given  
to her by a child.  
One kept looking for him in the  
crowd,  
Expecting him to be very pale, very  
serious,  
Carrying a book or two in his  
hand.

## **Ever So Tragic**

Heart—as in Latin pop songs  
Blaring from the pool hall radio.  
The air had thickened, the evening  
air.  
He took off his white shirt.  
The heart, one could mark it  
With lipstick on a bare chest,  
The way firing-squad  
commanders mark it.

He was reading in the papers  
About the artificial heart.  
The same plastic they use for  
wind-up toys,  
She thought. More likely  
Like an old wheelbarrow to push:  
Heart of stone, knife grinder's  
Stone . . .

Later  
It was raining and they got into

bed.

*O desire, O futile hope, O sighs!*  
In coal miner's pit and lantern:  
The heart, the bright red heart . . .

Didn't the blind man just call  
His little dog that?

*Hearts make haste, hasten on!*

## For the Sake of Amelia

Tending a cliff-hanging Grand  
Hotel  
In a country ravaged by civil war.  
My heart as its only bellhop.  
My brain as its Chinese cook.

It's a rundown seaside place  
With a row of gutted limousines  
out front,  
Monkeys and fighting cocks in the  
great ballroom,  
Potted palm trees grown wild to  
the ceilings.

Amelia surrounded by her beaus  
and fortunetellers,  
Painting her eyelashes and lips  
blue  
In the hour of dusk with the open

sea beyond,  
The long empty beaches, the tide's  
shimmer . . .

She pleading with me to check the  
ledgers,  
Find out if Lenin stayed here once,  
Buster Keaton, Nathaniel  
Hawthorne,  
St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who  
wrote on love?

A hotel in which one tangos to a  
silence  
Dark as cypresses in silent films

....  
In which children confide to  
imaginary friends . . .  
In which pages of an important  
letter are flying . . .

But now a buzz from the suite  
with mirrors.  
Amelia in the nude, black cotton  
over her eyes.  
It seems there's a fly  
Pestering her lover's Roman nose.

Night of distant guns, muffled and  
comfortable.  
I am running with a flyswatter on a  
silver tray

Strewn with Turkish delights  
And the Mask of Tragedy to cover  
her pubic hair.

## **At the Night Court**

You've combed yourself carefully,  
Your Honor, with a small fine-tooth  
comb  
You then cleverly concealed  
Before making your entrance  
In the splendor of your black  
robes.

The comb tucked inside a  
handkerchief  
Scented with the extract of dead  
roses—  
While you took your high seat  
Sternly eyeing each of the  
accused  
In the hush of the empty  
courtroom.

The dark curly hairs in the comb  
Did not come from your graying  
head.  
One of the cleaning women used  
it on herself  
While you dozed off in your  
chambers

Half undressed because of the  
heat.

The black comb in the pocket over  
the heart,  
You feel it tremble just as ours do  
When they ready themselves to  
make music  
Lacking only the paper you're  
signing,  
By the looks of it, with eyes  
closed.

## Dark Farmhouses

Windy evening,  
China-blue snow,  
The old people are shivering  
In their kitchens.

Truck without lights  
Idling on the highway,  
Is it a driver you require?  
Wait a bit.

There's coal to load up,  
A widow's sack of coal.

Is it a shovel you need?  
Idle on,

A shovel will come by and by  
Over the darkening plain.

A shovel,  
And a spade.

## **Popular Mechanics**

The enormous engineering  
problems  
You'll encounter attempting to  
crucify yourself  
Without helpers, pulleys,  
cogwheels,  
And other clever mechanical  
contrivances—

In a small, bare, white room,  
With only a loose-legged chair  
To reach the height of the ceiling—  
Only a shoe to beat the nails in.

Not to mention being naked for  
the occasion—  
So that each rib and muscle  
shows.  
Your left hand already spiked in,  
Only the right to wipe the sweat  
with,

To help yourself to a butt  
From the overflowed ashtray,  
You won't quite manage to light—  
And the night coming, the clever  
night.

## The Fly

He was writing the History of  
Optimism  
In Time of Madness. It was  
raining.  
One of the local butcher's largest  
Carrión fanciers kept pestering  
him.

There was a cat too watching the  
fly,  
And a gouty-footed old woman  
In a dirty bathrobe and frayed  
slippers  
Bringing in a cup of pale tea.

With many sighs and long pauses  
He found a bit of blue sky on the  
day of the Massacre of  
the Innocents.

He found a couple of lovers,  
A meadow strewn with yellow  
flowers . . .

But he couldn't go on . . . O blue-winged, shivering one,  
he whispered.

Some days it's like using a white cane  
And seeing mostly shadows  
As one gropes for the words that come next!

## Outside a Dirtroad Trailer

O exegetes, somber hermeneuts,  
Ingenious untanglers of ambiguities,  
A bald little man was washing  
The dainty feet of a very fat woman.

In a chair under a soaring shade tree,  
She kept giggling and shaking her huge breasts.  
There was also a boy with glasses Engrossed in a book of serious appearance.

One black sock drying on the line,  
A parked hearse with trash cans in the back,  
And a large flag hanging limp from the pole

On a day as yet unproclaimed as a  
holiday.

## Dear Helen

There's a thing in the world  
Called a sea cucumber.  
I know nothing about it.  
It just sounds cold and salty.  
I think a salad of such cukes  
Would be fine today.  
I would have to dive for it, though,  
Deep into the treacherous depths  
While you mince the garlic  
And sip the white wine  
Into which the night is falling.  
I should be back soon  
With those lovely green  
vegetables  
Out of the shark-infested sea.

## Trees in the Open Country

*for Jim*

Like those who were  
eyewitnesses  
to an enormity  
And have since remained

downcast  
At the very spot,

Their shadows gradually  
lengthening  
Into what look like canes, badly  
charred,  
No choice but to lean on them  
eventually,  
Together, and in a kind of reverie,

Awaiting the first solitary quip  
From the maddeningly occulted  
birds,  
Night birds bestirring themselves  
at last—  
If you are still listening,

One has the impression the world  
Is adamant on a matter of great  
importance,  
And then—it isn't anymore . . .  
Unless it's now the leaves' turn to  
reply?

## October Arriving

I only have a measly ant  
To think with today.  
Others have pictures of saints,  
Others have clouds in the sky.

The winter might be at the door,  
For he's all alone  
And in a hurry to hide.  
Nevertheless, unable to decide

He retraces his steps  
Several times and finds himself  
On a huge blank wall  
That has no window.

Dark masses of trees  
Cast their mazes before him,  
Only to erase them next  
With a sly, sea-surging sound.

## Ancient Autumn

Is that foolish youth still sawing  
The good branch he's sitting on?  
Do the hills wheeze like old men  
And the few remaining apples  
sway?  
Can he see the village in the valley  
The way a chicken hawk would?

Already smoke rises over the  
roofs,  
The days are getting short and  
chilly.  
Even he must rest from time to

time,  
So he's lit a long-stemmed pipe  
To watch a chimneysweep at work  
And a woman pin diapers on the  
line  
And then step behind some  
bushes,  
Hike her skirt so her bare ass  
shows  
While on the common  
humpbacked men  
Roll a barrel of hard cider or beer,  
And still beyond, past grazing  
cattle,  
Children play soldier and march in  
step.

He thinks, if the wind changes  
direction,  
He'll hear them shouting  
commands,  
But it doesn't, so the black  
horseman  
On the cobbled road remains  
inaudible.  
One instant he's coming his way,  
In the next he appears to be  
leaving in a hurry . . .  
It's such scenes with their air of  
menace,  
That make him muddled in the  
head.

He's not even aware that he has  
resumed sawing,  
That the big red sun is about to  
set.

## **Against Whatever It Is That's Encroaching**

Best of all is to be idle,  
And especially on a Thursday,  
And to sip wine while studying the  
light:  
The way it ages, yellows, turns  
ashen  
And then hesitates forever  
On the threshold of the night  
That could be bringing the first  
frost.

It's good to have a woman around  
just then,  
And two is even better.  
Let them whisper to each other  
And eye you with a smirk.  
Let them roll up their sleeves and  
unbutton their shirts a bit  
As this fine old twilight deserves,

And the small schoolboy  
Who has come home to a room

almost dark  
And now watches wide-eyed  
The grownups raise their glasses  
to him,  
The giddy-headed, red-haired  
woman  
With eyes tightly shut,  
As if she were about to cry or  
sing.

## **First Frost**

The time of the year for the  
mystics.  
October sky and the Cloud of  
Unknowing.  
The routes of eternity beckoning.  
Sign and enigma in the humblest  
of things.

Master cobbler Jakob Boehme  
Sat in our kitchen all morning.  
He sipped tea and warned of the  
quiet  
To which the wise must school  
themselves.

The young woman paid no  
attention.  
Hair fallen over her eyes,  
Breasts loose and damp in her

robe,  
Stubbornly scrubbing a difficult  
stain.

Then the dog's bark brought us all  
outdoors, And that wasn't just  
geese honking,  
But Dame Julian of Norwich  
herself discoursing  
On the marvelous courtesy and  
homeliness of the Maker.

## Without a Sough of Wind

Against the backdrop  
Of a twilight world  
In which one has done so little  
For one's soul

She hangs a skirt  
On the doorknob  
Puts a foot on the chair  
To take off a black stocking

And it's good to have eyes  
Just then for the familiar  
Large swinging breasts  
And the cleft of her ass

Before the recital  
Of that long day's

Woes and forebodings  
In the warm evening

With the drone of insects  
On the window screen  
And the lit dial of a radio  
Providing what light there is

Its sound turned much too low  
To make out the words  
Of what sounds like  
A silly old love song

### III

## ***from THE WORLD DOESN'T END***

My mother was a braid of black smoke.

She bore me swaddled over the burning cities.

The sky was a vast and windy place for a child to play.

We met many others who were just like us. They were trying to put on their overcoats with arms made of smoke.

The high heavens were full of little shrunken deaf ears instead of stars.

I was stolen by the gypsies. My parents stole me right back. Then the gypsies stole me again. This went on for some time. One minute I was in the caravan suckling the dark teat of my new mother, the next I sat at the

long dining room table eating my breakfast with a silver spoon.

It was the first day of spring. One of my fathers was singing in the bathtub; the other one was painting a live sparrow the colors of a tropical bird.

She's pressing me gently with a hot steam iron, or she slips her hand inside me as if I were a sock that needed mending. The thread she uses is like the trickle of my blood, but the needle's sharpness is all her own.

"You will ruin your eyes, Henrietta, in such bad light," her mother warns. And she's right! Never since the beginning of the world has there been so little light. Our winter afternoons have been known at times to last a hundred years.

We were so poor I had to take the place of the bait in the mousetrap. All alone in the cellar, I could hear them pacing upstairs, tossing and turning in their beds. "These are dark and evil days," the mouse told me as he nibbled my ear. Years passed. My mother wore a cat-fur collar which she stroked until its sparks lit up the cellar.

I am the last Napoleonic soldier. It's almost two hundred years later and I am still retreating from Moscow. The road is lined with white birch trees and the mud comes up to my knees. The one-eyed woman wants to sell me a chicken, and I don't even have any clothes on.

The Germans are going one way; I am going the other. The Russians are going still another way and waving goodbye. I have a ceremonial saber. I use it to cut my hair, which is four feet long.

"Everybody knows the story about me and Dr. Freud," says my grandfather.

"We were in love with the same pair of black shoes in the window of the same shoe store. The store, unfortunately, was always closed. There'd be a sign: DEATH IN THE FAMILY or BACK AFTER LUNCH, but no matter how long I waited, no one would come to open.

"Once I caught Dr. Freud there shamelessly admiring the shoes. We glared at each other before going our separate ways, never to meet again."

He held the Beast of the Apocalypse by its tail! Oh beards on fire, our doom

appeared sealed. The buildings were tottering; the computer screens were as dark as our grandmother's cupboard. We were too frightened to plead. Another century gone to hell—and for what? All because some people don't know how to bring up their children.

It was the epoch of the masters of levitation. Some evenings we saw solitary men and women floating above the dark treetops. Could they have been sleeping or thinking? They made no attempt to navigate. The wind nudged them ever so slightly. We were afraid to speak, to breathe. Even the nightbirds were quiet. Later, we'd mention the little book clasped in the hands of the young woman, and the way that old man lost his hat to the cypresses.

In the morning there were not even clouds in the sky. We saw a few crows preen themselves at the edge of the road; the shirts raise their empty sleeves on the blind woman's clothesline.

Ghost stories written as algebraic equations. Little Emily at the blackboard is very frightened. The X's

look like a graveyard at night. The teacher wants her to poke among them with a piece of chalk. All the children hold their breath. The white chalk squeaks once among the plus and minus signs, and then it's quiet again.

The city had fallen. We came to the window of a house drawn by a madman. The setting sun shone on a few abandoned machines of futility. "I remember," someone said, "how in ancient times one could turn a wolf into a human and then lecture it to one's heart's content."

The stone is a mirror which works poorly. Nothing in it but dimness. Your dimness or its dimness, who's to say? In the hush your heart sounds like a black cricket.

Lover of endless disappointments with your collection of old postcards, I'm coming! I'm coming! You want to show me a train station with its clock stopped at five past five. We can't see inside the stationmaster's window because of the grime. We don't even know if there's a train waiting on the platform, much less if a woman in

black is hurrying through the front door. There are no other people in sight, so it must be a quiet station. Some small town so effaced by time it has only one veiled widow left, and now she too is leaving with her secret.

The hundred-year-old china doll's head the sea washes up on its gray beach. One would like to know the story. One would like to make it up, make up many stories. It's been so long in the sea, the eyes and nose have been erased, its faint smile is even fainter. With the night coming, one would like to see oneself walking the empty beach and bending down to it.

Margaret was copying a recipe for "saints sautéed in onions" from an old cookbook. The ten thousand sounds of the world were hushed so we could hear the scratching of her pen. The saint was asleep in her bedroom with a wet cloth over his eyes. Outside the window, the author of the book sat in a flowering apple tree killing lice between his fingernails.

A poem about sitting on a New York rooftop on a chill autumn evening,

drinking red wine, surrounded by tall buildings, the little kids running dangerously to the edge, the beautiful girl everyone's secretly in love with sitting by herself. She will die young but we don't know that yet. She has a hole in her black stocking, big toe showing, toe painted red . . . And the skyscrapers . . . in the failing light . . . like new Chaldeans, pythonesses, Cassandras . . . because of their many blind windows.

"Tropical luxuriance around the idea of the soul," writes Nietzsche. I always felt that too, Friedrich! The Amazon jungle with its brightly colored birds squawking in every tree, but its depths dark and hushed. The beautiful lost girl is giving suck to a little monkey. The great lizard in attendance wears ecclesiastical robes and speaks French to her: "La Reine des Reines," he chants. Not the least charm of this tableau is that it can be so easily dismissed as preposterous and insulting to religious sentiments.

Are Russian cannibals worse than the English? Of course. The English eat only your heart, the Russians the soul. "The soul is a mirage in the desert," I

told Anna Alexandrovna, but she went on eating mine anyway.

“Like a confit of duck, or like a sparkling littleneck clam still in its native brine?” I inquired. But she just rubbed her tummy and smiled naughtily at me from across the table.

My guardian angel is afraid of the dark. He pretends he’s not, sends me ahead, tells me he’ll be along in a moment. Pretty soon I can’t see a thing. “This must be the darkest corner of heaven,” someone whispers behind my back. It turns out her guardian angel is missing too. “It’s an outrage,” I tell her. “The dirty little cowards leaving us like this alone.” And of course, for all we know, one of us may be an old man on his deathbed and the other one a sleepy little girl with glasses.

The old farmer in overalls hanging from a barn beam. The cows looking sideways. The old woman kneeling under his swaying feet in her Sunday black dress and touching the ground with her forehead like a Mohammedan. Outside the sky is full of sudsy clouds above an endless

plowed field with no other landmarks in view.

O witches, O poverty! The two who with a sidelong glance measured the thinness of my neck through the bars of the birdcage I carried on my shoulder . . .

They were far too young and elegant to be storybook witches. They wore low-cut party dresses, black seams in their stockings, lips thickly painted red.

The big-hearted trees offered their leaves by whispering armfuls over the winding path where the two eventually vanished.

I was left with my cage, its idiotic feeding dish, the even more absurd vanity mirror, and the faintly sounding silver bell.

Once I knew, then I forgot. It was as if I had fallen asleep in a field only to discover at waking that a grove of trees had grown up around me.

“Doubt nothing, believe everything” was my friend’s idea of metaphysics, although his brother ran away with his wife. He still bought her a rose every day, sat in the empty house for the

next twenty years talking to her about the weather.

I was already dozing off in the shade, dreaming that the rustling trees were my many selves explaining themselves all at the same time so that I could not make out a single word. My life was a beautiful mystery on the verge of understanding, always on the verge! Think of it!

My friend's empty house with every one of its windows lit. The dark trees multiplying all around it.

Thousands of old men with pants lowered sleeping in public restrooms. You're raving! You're exaggerating! Thousands of Maria Magdalenas, I see, kneeling at their feet, weeping.

A century of gathering clouds. Ghost ships arriving and leaving. The sea deeper, vaster. The parrot in the bamboo cage spoke several languages. The captain in the daguerreotype had his cheeks painted red. He brought a half-naked girl home from the tropics whom they kept chained in the attic till her death. After lunch, someone told of a race of people without mouths who subsisted only on the scent of flowers. It was

the age of busy widow's walks, fires lit  
with pages of love letters, long-trailing  
white gowns and much soundless  
screaming in the small hours of the  
night.

The time of minor poets is coming.  
Goodbye Whitman, Dickinson, Frost.  
Welcome you whose fame will never  
reach beyond your closest family, and  
perhaps one or two good friends  
gathered after dinner over a jug of  
fierce red wine . . . while the children  
are falling asleep and complaining  
about the noise you're making as you  
rummage through the closets for your  
old poems, afraid your wife might've  
thrown them out with last spring's  
cleaning.

It's snowing, says someone who  
has peeked into the dark night, and  
then he, too, turns toward you as you  
prepare yourself to read, in a manner  
somewhat theatrical and with a face  
turning red, the long rambling love  
poem whose final stanza (unknown to  
you) is hopelessly missing.

—after Aleksandar Ristović

Lots of people around here have been  
taken for rides in UFOs. You wouldn't  
think that possible with all the pretty

white churches in sight so well attended on Sundays.

“The round square doesn’t exist,” says the teacher to the dull-witted boy. His mother was abducted only last night. All expectations to the contrary, she sits in the corner grinning to herself. The sky is vast and blue.

“They’re so small, they can sleep inside their own ears,” says one eighty-year-old twin to the other.

My father loved the strange books of André Breton. He’d raise the wine glass and toast those far-off evenings “when butterflies formed a single uncut ribbon.” Or we’d go out for a piss in the back alley and he’d say, “Here are some binoculars for blindfolded eyes.” We lived in a rundown tenement that smelled of old people and their pets.

“Hovering on the edge of the abyss, permeated with the perfume of the forbidden,” we’d take turns cutting the smoked sausage on the table. “I love America,” he’d tell us. We were going to make a million dollars manufacturing objects we had seen in dreams that night.

Someone shuffles by my door  
muttering, "Our goose is cooked."

Strange! I have my knife and fork  
ready. I even have the napkin tied  
around my neck, but the plate before  
me is still empty.

Nevertheless, someone continues  
to mutter outside my door regarding a  
certain hypothetical, allegedly cooked  
goose that he claims is ours in  
common.

## **My Secret Identity Is**

The room is empty,  
And the window is open

## IV

# *from THE BOOK OF GODS AND DEVILS*

## **The Little Pins of Memory**

There was a child's Sunday suit  
Pinned to a tailor's dummy  
In a dusty store window.  
The store looked closed for years.

I lost my way there once  
In a Sunday kind of quiet,  
Sunday kind of afternoon light  
On a street of red-brick  
tenements.

How do you like that?  
I said to no one.  
How do you like that?  
I said it again today upon waking.

That street went on forever  
And all along I could feel the pins

In my back, prickling  
The dark and heavy cloth.

## St. Thomas Aquinas

I left parts of myself everywhere  
The way absent-minded people  
leave  
Gloves and umbrellas  
Whose colors are sad from  
dispensing so much bad luck.

I was on a park bench asleep.  
It was like the Art of Ancient  
Egypt.  
I didn't wish to bestir myself.  
I made my long shadow take the  
evening train.

"We give death to a child when we  
give it a doll,"  
Said the woman who had read  
Djuna Barnes.  
We whispered all night. She had  
traveled to darkest Africa.  
She had many stories to tell about  
the jungle.

I was already in New York looking  
for work.  
It was raining as in the days of

Noah.  
I stood in many doorways of that  
great city.  
Once I asked a man in a tuxedo  
for a cigarette.  
He gave me a frightened look and  
stepped out into the rain.

Since "man naturally desires  
happiness,"  
According to St. Thomas Aquinas,  
Who gave irrefutable proof of  
God's existence and purpose,  
I loaded trucks in the Garment  
Center.  
Me and a black man stole a  
woman's red dress.  
It was of silk; it shimmered.

Upon a gloomy night with all our  
loving ardors on fire,  
We carried it down the long empty  
avenue,  
Each holding one sleeve.  
The heat was intolerable, causing  
many terrifying human faces  
To come out of hiding.

In the Public Library Reading  
Room  
There was a single ceiling fan  
barely turning.

I had the travels of Herman  
Melville to serve me as a pillow.  
I was on a ghost ship with its sails  
fully raised.  
I could see no land anywhere.  
The sea and its monsters could  
not cool me.

I followed a saintly-looking nurse  
into a doctor's office.  
We edged past people with eyes  
and ears bandaged.  
"I am a medieval philosopher in  
exile,"  
I explained to my landlady that  
night.  
And, truly, I no longer looked like  
myself.  
I wore glasses with a nasty spider  
crack over one eye.

I stayed in the movies all day long.  
A woman on the screen walked  
through a bombed city  
Again and again. She wore army  
boots.  
Her legs were long and bare. It  
was cold wherever she was.  
She had her back turned to me,  
but I was in love with her.  
I expected to find wartime Europe  
at the exit.

It wasn't even snowing! Everyone I  
met  
Wore a part of my destiny like a  
carnival mask.  
"I'm Bartleby the Scrivener," I told  
the Italian waiter.  
"Me too," he replied.  
And I could see nothing but  
overflowing ashtrays  
The human-faced flies were busy  
examining.

## A Letter

Dear philosophers, I get sad when  
I think.  
Is it the same with you?  
Just as I'm about to sink my teeth  
into the noumenon,  
Some old girlfriend comes to  
distract me.  
"She's not even alive!" I yell to  
heaven.

The wintry light made me go out  
of my way.  
I saw beds covered with identical  
gray blankets.  
I saw grim-looking men holding a  
naked woman

While they hosed her with cold  
water.  
Was that to calm her nerves, or  
was it punishment?

I went to visit my friend Bob who  
said to me:  
“We reach the real by overcoming  
the seduction of images.”  
I was overjoyed, until I realized  
Such abstinence will never be  
possible for me.  
I caught myself looking out the  
window.

Bob’s father was taking their dog  
for a walk.  
He moved with pain; the dog  
waited for him.  
There was no one else in the park,  
Only bare trees with an infinity of  
tragic shapes  
To make thinking difficult.

## Factory

The machines were gone, and so  
were those who worked them.  
A single high-backed chair stood  
like a throne  
In all that empty space.

I was on the floor making myself  
comfortable  
For a long night of little sleep and  
much thinking.

An empty birdcage hung from a  
steam pipe.  
In it I kept an apple and a small  
paring knife.  
I placed newspapers all around  
me on the floor  
So I could jump at the slightest  
rustle.  
It was like the scratching of a pen,  
The silence of the night writing in  
its diary.

Of rats who came to pay me a visit  
I had the highest opinion.  
They'd stand on two feet  
As if about to make a polite  
request  
On a matter of great importance.

Many other strange things came  
to pass.  
Once a naked woman climbed on  
the chair  
To reach the apple in the cage.  
I was on the floor watching her go  
on tiptoe,

Her hand fluttering in the cage like  
a bird.

On other days, the sun peeked  
through dusty windowpanes  
To see what time it was. But there  
was no clock,  
Only the knife in the cage, glinting  
like a mirror,  
And the chair in the far corner  
Where someone once sat facing  
the brick wall.

## Shelley

*for M. Follain*

Poet of the dead leaves driven like  
ghosts,  
Driven like pestilence-stricken  
multitudes,  
I read you first  
One rainy evening in New York  
City,

In my atrocious Slavic accent,  
Saying the mellifluous verses  
From a battered, much-stained  
volume  
I had bought earlier that day  
In a secondhand bookstore on

Fourth Avenue  
Run by an initiate of the occult  
masters.

The little money I had being  
almost spent,  
I walked the streets my nose in  
the book.  
I sat in a dingy coffee shop  
With last summer's dead flies on  
the table.  
The owner was an ex-sailor  
Who had grown a huge hump on  
his back  
While watching the rain, the empty  
street.  
He was glad to have me sit and  
read.  
He'd refill my cup with a liquid  
dark as river Styx.

Shelley spoke of a mad, blind,  
dying king;  
Of rulers who neither see, nor feel,  
nor know;  
Of graves from which a glorious  
Phantom may  
Burst to illumine our tempestuous  
day.

I too felt like a glorious phantom  
Going to have my dinner

In a Chinese restaurant I knew so well.

It had a three-fingered waiter  
Who'd bring my soup and rice  
each night  
Without ever saying a word.

I never saw anyone else there.  
The kitchen was separated by a curtain  
Of glass beads which clicked faintly  
Whenever the front door opened.  
The front door opened that evening  
To admit a pale little girl with glasses.

The poet spoke of the everlasting universe  
Of things . . . of gleams of a remoter world  
Which visit the soul in sleep . . .  
Of a desert peopled by storms alone . . .

The streets were strewn with broken umbrellas  
Which looked like funereal kites  
This little Chinese girl might have made.

The bars on MacDougal Street  
were emptying.  
There had been a fistfight.  
A man leaned against a lamppost  
arms extended as if crucified,  
The rain washing the blood off his  
face.

In a dimly lit side street,  
Where the sidewalk shone like a  
ballroom mirror  
At closing time—  
A well-dressed man without any  
shoes  
Asked me for money.  
His eyes shone, he looked  
triumphant  
Like a fencing master  
Who had just struck a mortal  
blow.

How strange it all was . . . The  
world's raffle  
That dark October night . . .  
The yellowed volume of poetry  
With its Splendors and Gloom  
Which I studied by the light of  
storefronts:  
Drugstores and barbershops,  
Afraid of my small windowless  
room

Cold as a tomb of an infant emperor.

## The Devils

You were a “victim of  
semiromantic anarchism  
In its most irrational form.”  
I was “ill at ease in an ambiguous  
world

Deserted by Providence.” We  
drank gin  
And made love in the afternoon.  
The neighbors’  
TVs were tuned to soap operas.

The unhappy couples spoke little.  
There were interminable pauses.  
Soft organ music. Someone  
coughing.

“It’s like Strindberg’s Dream Play,”  
you said.  
“What is?” I asked and got no  
reply.  
I was watching a spider on the  
ceiling.

It was the kind St. Veronica ate in  
her martyrdom.

"That woman subsisted on  
spiders only,"  
I told the janitor when he came to  
fix the faucet.

He wore dirty overalls and a derby  
hat.

Once he had been an inmate of a  
notorious state institution.

"I'm no longer Jesus," he informed  
us happily.

He believed only in devils now.  
"This building is full of them," he  
confided.

One could see their horns and  
tails

If one caught them in their baths.  
"He's got Dark Ages on his brain,"  
you said.  
"Who does?" I asked and got no  
reply.

The spider had the beginnings of  
a web  
Over our heads. The world was  
quiet  
Except when one of us took a sip  
of gin.

# Crepuscule with Nellie

*for Ira*

Monk at the Five Spot  
late one night.

"Ruby, My Dear," "Epistrophy."

The place nearly empty  
Because of the cold spell.  
One beautiful black transvestite  
alone up front,  
Sipping his drink demurely.

The music Pythagorean,  
one note at a time  
Connecting the heavenly spheres,  
While I leaned against the bar  
surveying the premises  
Through cigarette smoke.

All of a sudden, a clear sense  
of a memorable occasion . . .  
The joy of it, the delicious  
melancholy . . .  
This very strange man bent over  
the piano  
shaking his head, humming  
.

"Misterioso."

Then it was all over, thank you!  
Chairs being stacked up on tables,  
    their legs up.  
The prospect of the freeze  
outside,  
    the long walk home,  
Making one procrastinatory.

Who said Americans don't have  
history,  
    only endless nostalgia?  
And where the hell was Nellie?

## Two Dogs

*for Charles and Holly*

An old dog afraid of his own  
shadow  
In some Southern town.  
The story told me by a woman  
going blind,  
One fine summer evening  
As shadows were creeping  
Out of the New Hampshire woods,  
A long street with just a worried  
dog  
And a couple of dusty chickens,  
And all that sun beating down  
In that nameless Southern town.

It made me remember the  
Germans marching  
Past our house in 1944 .  
The way everybody stood on the  
sidewalk  
Watching them out of the corner  
of the eye,  
The earth trembling, death going  
by . . .  
A little white dog ran into the  
street  
And got entangled with the  
soldiers' feet.  
A kick made him fly as if he had  
wings.  
That's what I keep seeing!  
Night coming down. A dog with  
wings.

## **Evening Talk**

Everything you didn't understand  
Made you what you are. Strangers  
Whose eye you caught on the  
street  
Studying you. Perhaps they were  
the all-seeing  
Illuminati? They knew what you  
didn't,  
And left you troubled like a  
strange dream.

Not even the light stayed the same.  
Where did all that hard glare come from?  
And the scent, as if mythical beings  
Were being groomed and fed stalks of hay  
On these roofs drifting among the evening clouds.

You didn't understand a thing!  
You loved the crowds at the end of the day  
That brought you so many mysteries.  
There was always someone you were meant to meet  
Who for some reason wasn't waiting.  
Or perhaps they were? But not here, friend.

You should have crossed the street  
And followed that obviously demented woman  
With the long streak of blood-red hair  
Which the sky took up like a distant cry.

# The Betrothal

I found a key  
In the street, someone's  
House key  
Lying there, glinting,

Long ago; the one  
Who lost it  
Is not going to remember it  
Tonight, as I do.

It was a huge city  
Of many dark windows,  
Columns and domes.  
I stood there thinking.

The street ahead of me  
Shadowy, full of peril  
Now that I held  
The key. One or two

Late strollers  
Unhurried and grave  
In view. The sky above them  
Of an unearthly clarity.

Eternity jealous  
Of the present moment,  
It occurred to me!  
And then the moment was over.

## **Frightening Toys**

History practicing its scissor-clips  
In the dark,  
So everything comes out in the  
end  
Missing an arm or a leg.

Still, if that's all you've got  
To play with today . . .  
This doll at least had a head,  
And its lips were red!

Frame houses like grim exhibits  
Lining the empty street  
Where a little girl sat on the steps  
In a flowered nightgown, talking to  
it.

It looked like a serious matter,  
Even the rain wanted to hear  
about it,  
So it fell on her eyelashes,  
And made them glisten.

## **The Big War**

We played war during the war,  
Margaret. Toy soldiers were in big  
demand,

The kind made from clay.  
The lead ones they melted into  
bullets, I suppose.

You never saw anything as  
beautiful  
As those clay regiments! I used to  
lie on the floor  
For hours staring them in the eye.  
I remember them staring back at  
me in wonder.

How strange they must have felt  
Standing stiffly at attention  
Before a large, uncomprehending  
creature  
With a mustache made of milk.

In time they broke, or I broke them  
on purpose.  
There was wire inside their limbs,  
Inside their chests, but nothing in  
the heads!  
Margaret, I made sure.

Nothing at all in the heads . . .  
Just an arm, now and then, an  
officer's arm,  
Wielding a saber from a crack  
In my deaf grandmother's kitchen  
floor.

# Death, the Philosopher

He gives excellent advice by example.  
"See!" he says. "See that?"  
And he doesn't have to open his mouth  
To tell you what.  
You can trust his vast experience.  
Still, there's no huff in him.  
Once he had a most unfortunate passion.  
It came to an end.  
He loved the way the summer dusk fell.  
He wanted to have it falling forever.  
It was not possible.  
That was the big secret.  
It's dreadful when things get as bad as that—  
But then they don't!  
He got the point, and so, one day,  
Miraculously lucid, you, too, came to ask  
About the strangeness of it all.  
Charles, you said,  
How strange you should be here at all!

## **First Thing in the Morning**

To find a bit of thread  
But twisted  
In a peculiar way  
And fallen  
In an unlikely place

A black thread  
Before the mystery  
Of a closed door  
The greater mystery  
Of the four bare walls

And catch oneself thinking  
Do I know anyone  
Who wears such dark garments  
Worn to threads  
First thing in the morning?

## **The White Room**

The obvious is difficult  
To prove. Many prefer  
The hidden. I did, too.  
I listened to the trees.

They had a secret  
Which they were about to

Make known to me,  
And then didn't.

Summer came. Each tree  
On my street had its own  
Scheherazade. My nights  
Were a part of their wild

Storytelling. We were  
Entering dark houses,  
More and more dark houses  
Hushed and abandoned.

There was someone with eyes  
closed  
On the upper floors.  
The thought of it, and the wonder,  
Kept me sleepless.

The truth is bald and cold,  
Said the woman  
Who always wore white.  
She didn't leave her room much.

The sun pointed to one or two  
Things that had survived  
The long night intact.  
The simplest things,

Difficult in their obviousness.  
They made no noise.

It was the kind of day  
People described as “perfect.”

Gods disguising themselves  
As black hairpins, a hand mirror,  
A comb with a tooth missing?  
No! That wasn’t it.

Just things as they are,  
Unblinking, lying mute  
In that bright light—  
And the trees waiting for the night.

## **Winter Sunset**

Such skies came to worry men  
On the eve of great battles  
With clouds soaked in blood  
Fleeing the armies of the night,

An old woman was summoned  
Who could predict the future,  
But she kept her mouth shut  
Even when shown the naked  
sword.

In what remained of the light,  
The white village church  
Clutched its bird-shaped  
weathervane  
Above the low rooftops.

A small child, who had been  
Nursing at his mother's breast,  
Hid his face from her  
To see the horses rear in the sky.

## **The Pieces of the Clock Lie Scattered**

So, hurry up!  
The evening's coming.  
The grownups are on the way.  
There'll be hell to pay.

You forgot about time  
While you sought its secret  
In the slippery wheels,  
Some of which had teeth.

You meant to enthrall  
The girl across the hall.  
She drew so near,  
Her breast brushed your ear.

She ought to have gone home,  
But you kept telling her  
You'll have it together again  
And ticking in no time.

Instead, you're under the table  
Together, searching the floor.  
Your hands are trembling,  
And there's a key in the door.

## The Immortal

You're shivering, O my memory.  
You went out early and without a coat  
To visit your old schoolmasters,  
The cruel schoolmasters and their pet monkeys.  
You took a wrong turn somewhere.  
You met an army of gray days,  
A ghost army of years on the march.  
It was the bread they fed you,  
The kind it takes a lifetime to chew.

You found yourself again on that street  
Inside that small, rented room  
With its single dusty window.  
Outside it was snowing quietly,  
Snowing and snowing for days on end.  
You were ill and in bed.  
Everyone else had gone to work.

The blind old woman next door,  
Whose sighs and heavy steps  
you'd welcome now,  
Had died mysteriously in the  
summer.

You had your own heartbeat to  
attend to.

You were perfectly alone and  
anonymous.

It would have taken months for  
anyone

To begin to miss you. The chill  
Made you pull the covers up to  
your chin.

You remembered the lost arctic  
voyagers,

The evening snow erasing their  
footprints.

You had no money and no job.

Both of your lungs were hurting;  
still,

You had no intention of lifting a  
finger

To help yourself. You were  
immortal!

Outside, the same dark snowflake  
Seemed to be falling over and  
over again.

You studied the cracked walls,

The maplike water stain on the  
ceiling,  
Trying to fix in your mind its cities  
and rivers.

Time had stopped at dusk.  
You were shivering at the thought  
Of such great happiness.

## **At the Corner**

The fat sisters  
Kept a candy store  
Dim and narrow  
With dusty jars  
Of jawbreaking candy.

We stayed thin, stayed  
Glum, chewing gum  
While staring at the floor,  
The shoes of many strangers  
Rushing in and out,

Making the papers outside  
Flutter audibly  
Under the lead weights,  
Their headlines  
Screaming in and out of view.

## **Cabbage**

She was about to chop the head  
In half,  
But I made her reconsider  
By telling her:  
“Cabbage symbolizes mysterious  
love.”

Or so said one Charles Fourier,  
Who said many other strange and  
wonderful things,  
So that people called him mad  
behind his back,

Whereupon I kissed the back of  
her neck  
Ever so gently,

Whereupon she cut the cabbage  
in two  
With a single stroke of her knife.

## **The Initiate**

St. John of the Cross wore dark  
glasses  
When he passed me on the street.  
St. Therese of Ávila, beautiful and  
grave,

Came at me spreading her wings  
like a seagull.

"Lost soul," they both cried out,  
"Where is your home?"

I was one of death's juggling balls.  
The city was a mystic circus  
With all of its lights dimmed,  
The night's performance already  
started.

On a wide, poorly lit avenue,  
Store windows waited for me,  
Watched for me coming,  
Knew what thoughts were on my  
mind.

In a church, where the child killer,  
So the papers said,  
Hid himself one night from the  
cold,  
I sat in a pew blowing on my  
hands.

Like a thought forgotten till called  
forth—  
The new snow on the sidewalk  
Bore fresh footprints—some  
unknown master  
Offering to guide my steps from  
now on.

In truth, I had no idea what was  
happening to me.  
Four young hoods blocked my  
way,  
Three dead serious,  
One smiling crazily as he laid his  
hand on me.

I let them have my raincoat,  
And went off telling myself  
It was important to remain calm,  
And to continue to observe  
oneself  
As if one was a complete  
stranger.

At the address I'd been given,  
There were white X's painted on  
each window.  
I knocked, but no one came to  
open.  
By and by a girl joined me on the  
steps.  
Her name was Alma, a propitious  
sign.

She knew a housewife  
Who solved life's riddles  
In a voice of a Sumerian queen.  
We had a long chat about that

While shivering and stamping our feet.

In the sixteenth century, she told me,

Dabblers in occult sciences  
Were roasted in iron cages,  
Or else they were clothed in rags  
And hanged on gibbets painted gold.

Once in a hotel room in Chicago, I confessed,

I caught sight of someone in the mirror

Who had my face,  
But whose eyes I did not recognize—  
Two hard, all-knowing eyes.

The hunger, the cold and the lack of sleep

Brought on a kind of ecstasy.

I walked the streets as if pursued by demons,

Trying to warm myself.

There was the East River,

There was the Hudson.

Their waters shone at midnight

Like oil in sanctuary lamps.

Something was about to happen  
to me  
For which there would never be  
any words afterward.  
I stood as if transfixed,  
Watching the sky clear.

It was so quiet where I was,  
You could hear a pin drop.  
I thought I heard a pin drop  
And went looking for it  
In the dark, deserted city.

1986–2011

## Paradise

In a neighborhood once called  
Hell's Kitchen  
Where a beggar claimed to be  
playing Nero's fiddle  
While the city burned in  
midsummer heat;  
Where a lady barber who called  
herself Cleopatra  
Wielded the scissors of fate over  
my head  
Threatening to cut off my ears  
and nose;  
Where a man and a woman went  
walking naked

In one of the dark side streets at dawn.

I must be dreaming, I told myself.  
It was like meeting a couple of sphinxes.

I expected them to have wings,  
bodies of lions:  
Him with his wildly tattooed chest;  
Her with her huge, dangling breasts.

It happened so quickly, and so long ago!

You know that time just before the day breaks  
When one yearns to lie down on cool sheets  
In a room with shades drawn?  
The hour when the beautiful suicides  
Lying side by side in the morgue  
Get up and walk out into the first light.

The curtains of cheap hotels flying out of windows  
Like seagulls, but everything else quiet . . .  
Steam rising out of the subway gratings . . .

Bodies glistening with sweat . . .  
Madness, and you might even say,  
paradise!

## In the Library

*for Octavio*

There's a book called  
*A Dictionary of Angels*.  
No one has opened it in fifty years,  
I know, because when I did,  
The covers creaked, the pages  
Crumbled. There I discovered

The angels were once as plentiful  
As species of flies.  
The sky at dusk  
Used to be thick with them.  
You had to wave both arms  
Just to keep them away.

Now the sun is shining  
Through the tall windows.  
The library is a quiet place.  
Angels and gods huddled  
In dark unopened books.  
The great secret lies  
On some shelf Miss Jones  
Passes every day on her rounds.

She's very tall, so she keeps  
Her head tipped as if listening.  
The books are whispering.  
I hear nothing, but she does.

## The Wail

As if there were nothing to live for

...

As if there were . . . nothing.  
In the fading light, our mother  
Sat sewing with her head bowed.

Did her hand tremble? By the first  
faint  
Hint of night coming, how all lay  
Still, except for the memory of  
that voice:  
Him whom the wild life hurried  
away . . .

Long stretches of silence in  
between.  
Clock talking to a clock.  
Dogs lying on their paws with ears  
cocked.  
You and me afraid to breathe.

Finally, she went to peek.  
Someone covered  
With a newspaper on the

sidewalk.  
Otherwise, no one about. The  
street empty.  
The sky full of homeless clouds.

## The Scarecrow

God's refuted but the devil's not.

This year's tomatoes are  
something to see.  
Bite into them, Martha,  
As you would into a ripe apple.  
After each bite add a little salt.

If the juices run down your chin  
Onto your bare breasts,  
Bend over the kitchen sink.

From there you can see your  
husband  
Come to a dead stop in the empty  
field  
Before one of his bleakest  
thoughts  
Spreading its arms like a  
scarecrow.

## Windy Evening

This old world needs propping up  
When it gets this cold and windy.  
The cleverly painted sets,  
Oh, they're shaking badly!  
They're about to come down.

There'll be nothing but infinite  
space then.  
The silence supreme. Almighty  
silence.  
Egyptian sky. Stars like torches  
Of grave robbers entering the  
crypts of the kings.  
Even the wind pausing, waiting to  
see.

Better grab hold of that tree,  
Lucille.  
Its shape crazed, terror-stricken.  
I'll hold the barn.  
The chickens in it uneasy.  
Smart chickens, rickety world.

# V

## ***from HOTEL INSOMNIA***

### **Evening Chess**

The Black Queen raised high  
In my father's angry hand.

### **The City**

At least one crucified at every corner.  
The eyes of a mystic, madman, murderer.  
They know it's truly for nothing.  
The eyes do. All the martyr's sufferings  
On parade. Exalted mother of us all  
Tending her bundles on the sidewalk,  
Speaking to each as if it were a holy child.

There were many who saw none  
of this.  
A couple lingered on kissing lustily  
Right where someone lay under a  
newspaper.  
His bloody feet, swollen twice  
their size,  
Jutted out into the cold of the day,  
Grim proofs of a new doctrine.

I tell you, I was afraid. A man  
screamed  
And continued walking as if  
nothing had happened.  
Everyone whose eyes I sought  
avoided mine.  
Was I beginning to resemble him a  
little?  
I had no answer to any of these  
questions.  
Neither did the crucified on the  
next corner.

## **Stub of a Red Pencil**

You were sharpened to a fine  
point  
With a rusty razor blade.  
Then the unknown hand swept the  
shavings

Into its moist palm  
And disappeared from view.

You lay on the desk next to  
The official-looking document  
With a long list of names.  
It was up to us to imagine the rest:  
The high ceiling with its cracks  
And odd-shaped water stains;  
The window with its view  
Of roofs covered with snow.

An inconceivable, varied world  
Surrounding your severe presence  
On every side,  
Stub of a red pencil.

## The Prodigal

Dark morning rain  
Meant to fall  
On a prison and a schoolyard,  
Falling meanwhile  
On my mother and her old dog.

How slow she shuffles now  
In my father's Sunday shoes.  
The dog by her side  
Trembling with each step  
As he tries to keep up.

I am on another corner waiting  
With my head shaved.  
My mind hops like a sparrow  
In the rain.  
I'm always watching and worrying  
about her.

Everything is a magic ritual,  
A secret cinema,  
The way she appears in a window  
hours later  
To set the empty bowl  
And spoon on the table,  
And then exits  
So that the day may pass,  
And the night may fall  
Into the empty bowl,  
Empty room, empty house,  
While the rain keeps  
Knocking at the front door.

## **Hotel Insomnia**

I liked my little hole,  
Its window facing a brick wall.  
Next door there was a piano.  
A few evenings a month  
A crippled old man came to play  
“My Blue Heaven.”

Mostly, though, it was quiet.  
Each room with its spider in heavy  
overcoat  
Catching his fly with a web  
Of cigarette smoke and revery.  
So dark,  
I could not see my face in the  
shaving mirror.

At 5 A.M. the sound of bare feet  
upstairs.  
The "Gypsy" fortuneteller,  
Whose storefront is on the corner,  
Going to pee after a night of love.  
Once, too, the sound of a child  
sobbing.  
So near it was, I thought  
For a moment, I was sobbing  
myself.

## The Inanimate Object

In my long late-night talks with  
the jailers, I raised again the  
question of the object: Does it  
remain indifferent whether it is  
perceived or not? (I had in mind  
the one concealed and found  
posthumously while the newly  
vacated cell was fumigated and  
swept.)

"Like a carved-wood demon of some nightmarish species," said one. "In cipher writ," said another. We were drinking a homemade brew that made our heads spin. "When a neck button falls on the floor and hardly makes a sound," said the third with a smile, but I said nothing.

"If only one could leave behind a little something to make others stop and think," I thought to myself.

In the meantime, there was my piece of broken bottle to worry about. It was green and had a deadly cutting edge. I no longer remembered its hiding place, unless I had only dreamed of it, or this was another cell, another prison in an infinite series of prisons and long night talks with my jailers.

## **Outside Biaggi's Funeral Home**

Three old women sat knitting  
On the sidewalk  
Every time I walked by.

Good evening, ladies,  
I would say to them.  
Good morning, too.  
What a lovely time of year  
To be alive!

While they stared at me,  
The way house cats stare at a TV  
When their owner is at work,  
Two of them resuming their  
knitting,  
The third watching me  
Go my way  
With her mouth hanging open.

And that was all.  
I left the neighborhood and they  
stayed  
Knitting away.  
They could be still there today  
For it's that kind of day,  
Sweet and mild,  
It made me think of them again  
After a long, long while.

## The Tiger

*in memory of George Oppen*

In San Francisco, that winter,  
There was a dark little store

Full of sleepy Buddhas.  
The afternoon I walked in,  
No one came out to greet me.  
I stood among the sages  
As if trying to read their thoughts.

One was huge and made of stone.  
A few were the size of a child's  
head  
And had stains the color of dried  
blood.  
There were even some no bigger  
than mice,  
And they appeared to be listening.

"The winds of March, black winds,  
The gritty winds," the dead poet  
wrote.

At sundown his street was empty  
Except for my long shadow  
Open before me like scissors.  
There was his house where I told  
the story  
Of the Russian soldier,  
The one who looked Chinese.

He lay wounded in my father's  
bed,  
And I brought him water and  
matches.  
For that he gave me a little tiger

Made of ivory. Its mouth was open  
in anger,  
But it had no stripes left.

There was the night when I  
colored  
Its eyes black, its tongue red.  
My mother held the lamp for me,  
While worrying about the kind of  
luck  
This beast might bring us.

The tiger in my hand growled  
faintly  
When we were alone in the dark,  
But when I put my ear to the poet's  
door  
That afternoon, I heard nothing.

"The winds of March, black winds,  
The gritty winds," he once wrote.

## **Clouds Gathering**

It seemed the kind of life we  
wanted.  
Wild strawberries and cream in  
the morning.  
Sunlight in every room.  
The two of us walking by the sea  
naked.

Some evenings, however, we  
found ourselves  
Unsure of what comes next.  
Like tragic actors in a theater on  
fire,  
With birds circling over our heads,  
The dark pines strangely still,  
Each rock we stepped on bloodied  
by the sunset.

We were back on our terrace  
sipping wine.  
Why always this hint of an  
unhappy ending?  
Clouds of almost human  
appearance  
Gathering on the horizon, but the  
rest lovely  
With the air so mild and the sea  
untroubled.

The night suddenly upon us, a  
starless night.  
You lighting a candle, carrying it  
naked  
Into our bedroom and blowing it  
out quickly.  
The dark pines and grasses  
strangely still.

## Folk Songs

Sausage makers of History,  
The bloody kind,  
You all hail from a village  
Where the dog barking at the  
moon  
Is the only poet.

•

O King Oedipus, O Hamlet,  
Fallen like flies  
In the pot of cabbage soup,  
No use beating with your fists,  
Or sticking your tongues out.

•

Christ-faced spider on the wall  
Darkened by evening shadows,  
I spent my childhood on a cross  
In a yard full of weeds,  
White butterflies, and white  
chickens.

## War

The trembling finger of a woman  
Goes down the list of casualties

On the evening of the first snow.

The house is cold and the list is  
long.

All our names are included.

## A Book Full of Pictures

Father studied theology through  
the mail  
And this was exam time.  
Mother knitted. I sat quietly with a  
book  
Full of pictures. Night fell.  
My hands grew cold touching the  
faces  
Of dead kings and queens.

There was a black raincoat  
in the upstairs bedroom  
Swaying from the ceiling,  
But what was it doing there?  
Mother's long needles made quick  
crosses.  
They were black  
Like the inside of my head just  
then.

The pages I turned sounded like  
wings.

"The soul is a bird," he once said.  
In my book full of pictures  
A battle raged: lances and swords  
Made a kind of wintry forest  
With my heart spiked and bleeding  
in its branches.

## **Evening Walk**

You give the appearance of  
listening  
To my thoughts, O trees,  
Bent over the road I am walking  
On a late-summer evening  
When every one of you is a steep  
staircase  
The night is slowly descending.

The high leaves like my mother's  
lips  
Forever trembling, unable to  
decide,  
For there's a bit of wind,  
And it's like hearing voices,  
Or a mouth full of muffled  
laughter,  
A huge dark mouth we can all fit  
in  
Suddenly covered by a hand.

Everything quiet. Light  
Of some other evening strolling  
ahead,  
Long-ago evening of silk dresses,  
Bare feet, hair unpinned and  
falling.  
Happy heart, what heavy steps  
you take  
As you follow after them in the  
shadows.

The sky at the road's end  
cloudless and blue.  
The night birds like children  
Who won't come to dinner.  
Lost children in the darkening  
woods.

## **Hotel Starry Sky**

Millions of empty rooms with TV  
sets turned on.  
I wasn't there, but I saw  
everything.  
*Titanic* sinking like a birthday cake  
on the screen.  
Poseidon, the night clerk, blowing  
out the candles  
one by one.

At three in the morning the gum  
machine in the lobby  
With its cracked and defaced  
mirror  
Is a new Madonna with her infant  
child  
Wanting to know how much to tip  
the bellboy.

## To Think Clearly

What I need is a pig and an angel.  
The pig to stick his nose in a slop  
bucket,  
The angel to scratch his back  
And say sweet things in his ear.

The pig knows what's in store for  
him.  
Give him hope, angel child,  
With that foreverness stuff.  
Don't go admiring yourself  
In the butcher's knife  
As if it were a whore's mirror,  
Or tease him with a bloodstained  
apron  
By raising it above your knees.

The pig has stopped eating  
And stands among us thinking.

Already the crest of the rooster  
blazes  
In the morning darkness.  
He's not crowing but his eyes are  
fierce  
As he struts across the yard.

## The Chair

This chair was once a student of  
Euclid.

The book of his laws lay on its  
seat.  
The schoolhouse windows were  
open,  
So the wind turned the pages  
Whispering the glorious proofs.

The sun set over the golden roofs.  
Everywhere the shadows  
lengthened,  
But Euclid kept quiet about that.

## Missing Child

You of the dusty, sun-yellowed  
picture  
I saw twenty years ago

Inside the window of a dry-cleaning store,  
I thought of you again tonight  
Sitting by the window,  
Watching the street,  
As your mother must've done  
every night,

And still does, for all I know.  
The sky cloudy, and now even  
The rain beginning to fall  
On the same old city, the same old  
street  
With its padlocked, dimly lit store,  
And your thin, pale face  
Next to the poster for a firemen's  
ball.

## **Marina's Epic**

The Eskimos were ravaging Peru,  
Grandfather fought the Huns,  
Mother sold firecrackers to  
Bedouins.

We were inmates of an orphanage  
in Kraków;  
A prison in Panama;  
A school for beggars in Genoa.

In Japan I was taught how to  
catch ghosts  
With chopsticks.

In Amsterdam we saw a  
Christmas tree  
In a whorehouse window.

My sister roamed French  
battlefields in World War I  
Rescuing ladybugs.  
She'd carry the shivering insect  
Into a village church and leave it in  
care of a saint.

In Paris, we knew a Russian  
countess  
Who scrubbed floors at the opera  
With a red rose between her teeth.

Father played a dead man in a  
German movie.  
It was silent. The piano player  
looked like  
Edgar Allan Poe wearing a  
Moroccan fez.

On the back of a large suitcase  
We sailed the stormy Atlantic one  
February  
Taking turns to mend the rips in  
our grandmother's

wedding dress,  
We used as a sail.

The next thing we knew,  
We were outside a pink motel in  
Arizona singing:  
“We love you, life,  
Even though you’re always  
laughing at us.”

One day, we joined some Tibetan  
monks.  
They had a holy mountain  
From which one could see all of  
Los Angeles.

A meal of Sardinian goat cheese,  
Greek olives,  
Spanish wine and black Russian  
bread,  
Because talking about the past  
makes one hungry.

In New York, the movie screens  
were as big as the pyramids.  
Broadway was a river as wide as  
the Nile  
Crowded with barges and  
pleasure boats  
Carrying Cleopatras and her beaus  
for a night on the town.

We stood on the corner of Forty-second Street  
Peddling vials of gypsy love potion  
and statues of African gods,  
And waiting for General Washington  
To ride by on his white horse and nod in our direction.

## Lost Glove

Here's a woman's black glove.  
It ought to mean something.  
A thoughtful stranger left it  
On the red mailbox at the corner.

Three days the sky was troubled,  
Then today a few snowflakes fell  
On the glove, which someone,  
In the meantime, had turned over,  
So that its fingers could close

A little . . . Not yet a fist.  
So I waited, with the night coming.  
Something told me not to move.  
Here where flames rise from trash barrels,  
And the homeless sleep standing up.

## **Romantic Sonnet**

Evenings of sovereign clarity—  
Wine and bread on the table,  
Mother praying,  
Father naked in bed.

Was I that skinny boy stretched  
out  
In the field behind the house,  
His heart cut out with a toy knife?  
Was I the crow hovering over him?

Happiness, you are the bright red  
lining  
Of the dark winter coat  
Grief wears inside out.

This is about myself when I'm  
remembering,  
And your long insomniac's nails,  
O Time, I keep chewing and  
chewing.

## **Beauty**

I'm telling you, this was the real thing,  
the same one they kicked out of  
Aesthetics, told her she didn't exist!

O you simple, indefinable, ineffable, and so forth. I like your black apron, and your new Chinese girl's hairdo. I also like naps in the afternoon, well-chilled white wine, and the squabbling of philosophers.

What joy and happiness you give us each time you reach over the counter to take our money, so we catch a whiff of your breath. You've been chewing on sesame crackers and garlic salami, divine creature!

When I heard the old man, Plotinus, say something about "every soul wanting to possess you," I gave him a dirty look, and rushed home to unwrap and kiss the pink ham you sliced for me with your own hand.

## **My Quarrel with the Infinite**

I preferred the fleeting,  
Like a memory of a sip of wine  
Of noble vintage  
On the tongue with eyes closed  
....

When you tapped me on the shoulder,  
O light, unsayable in your splendor.

A lot of good you did to me.  
You just made my insomnia last  
longer.

I sat rapt at the spectacle,  
Secretly ruing the fugitive:  
All its provisory, short-lived  
Kisses and enchantments.

Here with the new day breaking,  
And a single scarecrow on the  
horizon  
Directing the traffic  
Of crows and their shadows.

## The Old World

*for Dan and Jeanne*

I believe in the soul; so far  
It hasn't made much difference.  
I remember an afternoon in Sicily.  
The ruins of some temple.  
Columns fallen in the grass like  
naked lovers.

The olives and goat cheese tasted  
delicious  
And so did the wine  
With which I toasted the coming  
night,

The darting swallows,  
The Saracen wind and moon.

It got darker. There was  
something  
Long before there were words:  
The evening meal of shepherds

...  
A fleeting whiteness among the  
trees ...  
Eternity eavesdropping on time.

The goddess going to bathe in the  
sea.

She must not be followed.  
These rocks, these cypress trees,  
May be her old lovers.  
Oh to be one of them, the wine  
whispered to me.

## Country Fair

*for Hayden Carruth*

If you didn't see the six-legged  
dog,  
It doesn't matter.  
We did and he mostly lay in the  
corner.  
As for the extra legs,

One got used to them quickly  
And thought of other things.  
Like, what a cold, dark night  
To be out at the fair.

Then the keeper threw a stick  
And the dog went after it  
On four legs, the other two  
flapping behind,  
Which made one girl shriek with  
laughter.

She was drunk and so was the  
man  
Who kept kissing her neck.  
The dog got the stick and looked  
back at us.  
And that was the whole show.

## ***from A WEDDING IN HELL***

### **Miracle Glass Co.**

Heavy mirror carried  
Across the street,  
I bow to you  
And to everything that appears in  
you,  
Momentarily  
And never again the same way:

This street with its pink sky,  
Row of gray tenements,  
A lone dog,  
Children on rollerskates,  
Woman buying flowers,  
Someone looking lost.

In you, mirror framed in gold  
And carried across the street

By someone I can't even see,  
To whom, too, I bow.

## Late Arrival

The world was already here  
Serene in its otherness.  
It only took you to arrive  
On the afternoon train  
To where no one awaited you.

A town no one ever remembered.  
Because of its ordinariness  
Where you lost your way  
Searching for a place to stay  
In a maze of identical streets.

It was then that you heard,  
As if for the very first time,  
The sound of your own footsteps  
Passing a church clock  
Which had stopped at one

On the corner of two streets  
Emptied by the hot sun.  
Two glimpses of the eternal  
For you to wonder about  
Before resuming your walk.

## **Tattooed City**

I, who am only an  
incomprehensible  
Bit of scribble  
On some warehouse wall  
Or some subway entrance.

Matchstick figure,  
Heart pierced by arrow,  
Scratch of a meter maid  
On a parked hearse.

CRAZY CHARLIE in red spraypaint  
Crowding for warmth  
With other unknown divinities  
In an underpass at night.

## **Dream Avenue**

Monumental, millennial  
decrepitude,  
As tragedy requires. A broad  
Avenue with trash unswept,  
A few solitary speck-sized figures  
Going about their business  
In a world already smudged by a  
schoolboy's eraser.

You've no idea what city this is,  
What country? It could be a  
dream,  
But is it yours? You're nothing  
But a vague sense of loss,  
A piercing, heart-wrenching dread  
On an avenue with no name

With a few figures conveniently  
small  
And blurred who, in any case,  
Appear to have their backs to you  
As they look elsewhere, beyond  
The long row of gray buildings and  
their many windows,  
Some of which appear broken.

## **Haunted Mind**

Savageries to come,  
Cities smelling of death already,  
What idol will you worship,  
Whose icy heart?

One cold Thursday night,  
In a neighborhood dive,  
I watched the Beast of War  
Lick its sex on TV.

There were three other customers:  
Mary sitting in old Joe's lap,

Her crazy son in the corner  
With arms spread wide over the  
pinball machine.

## Paradise Motel

Millions were dead; everybody  
was innocent.

I stayed in my room. The president  
Spoke of war as of a magic love  
potion.

My eyes were opened in  
astonishment.

In a mirror my face appeared to  
me  
Like a twice-canceled postage  
stamp.

I lived well, but life was awful.  
There were so many soldiers that  
day,

So many refugees crowding the  
roads.

Naturally, they all vanished  
With a touch of the hand.

History licked the corners of its  
bloody mouth.

On the pay channel, a man and a  
woman  
Were trading hungry kisses and

tearing off  
Each other's clothes while I looked  
on  
With the sound off and the room  
dark  
Except for the screen where the  
color  
Had too much red in it, too much  
pink.

## A Wedding in Hell

They were pale like the stones on  
the meadow  
The black sheep lick.  
Pale stones like children in their  
Sunday clothes  
Playing at bride and groom.

There we found a clock face with  
Roman numerals  
In the old man's overcoat pocket.  
He kept looking at the sky without  
recognizing it,  
And now it was time for a little  
rain to fall.

Your sheltering hands, Mother,  
which made the old man  
disappear.  
The Lord who saw over them

Saw into our hearts while we  
unlaced his boots.

I'm turning off the lights so His  
eyes won't find you, you said.  
O dreams like evening shadows  
on a windy meadow,  
And your hands, Mother, like white  
mice.

## The Dead in Photographs

All they could do is act innocent  
Standing still for the camera,  
Only a few of them thinking to  
move  
And leave a blur for posterity.

Others held their smiles forever.  
The groom with a suit too big for  
him,  
And his bride with a small straw  
hat  
And a topping of strawberries.

In Los Angeles, one Sunday  
morning,  
The photographer took a picture  
Of a closed barbershop  
And a black cat crossing an empty  
avenue,

A blind man outside a bus station  
Playing the guitar and singing,  
A little boy walking up to the  
camera  
Smiling and sticking his tongue  
out.

## **Madame Thebes**

That awful deceit of appearances.  
Some days  
Everything looks unfamiliar  
On my street.  
It's somebody else's life I'm living.

An immaculate silent order  
Of white buildings and dark  
clouds,  
And then the open door  
In a house with lowered voices.  
Someone left in a hurry,  
And they're waiting for me to  
come in  
With a lit match.

There's a rustle of a long skirt,  
But when I enter  
It's only the evening papers  
Sliding off the table  
Birdlike

In a large and drafty  
And now altogether empty room.

## Evening Visitor

You remind me of those dwarfs in  
Velázquez.

Former dogcatcher  
Promoted to professor at a  
correspondence school  
With a matchbook address.

That couple screwing and  
watching  
Themselves in the mirror,  
Do you approve of them  
As they gasp and roll their eyes in  
ecstasy?

And how about the solitary wine  
drinker?  
He's drinking because he can't  
decide  
Whether to kill only one of them or  
both—  
And here it's already morning!

Some damn bird chirping in the  
trees.  
Is that it? I beseech you. Answer  
me!

# **The Massacre of the Innocents**

The poets of the Late Tang  
Dynasty  
Could do nothing about it except  
to write:  
“On the western hills the sun sets  
....  
Horses blown by the whirlwind  
tread the clouds.”

I could not help myself either. I felt  
joy  
Even at the sight of a crow circling  
over me  
As I stretched out on the grass  
Alone now with the silence of the  
sky.

Only the wind making a slight  
rustle  
As it turned the pages of the book  
by my side,  
Back and forth, searching for  
something  
For that bloody crow to read.

## Pascal's Idea

My insignificance is a sign of my  
greatness.

Marvel, draw back  
As I scurry in my roachlike way  
Through these greasy kitchens  
With their raised knives  
And their fat-assed cooks  
Bent over steaming pots.

My life is a triumph over the  
world's connivances  
And blind chance.  
I found the poison you left for me  
Extremely nourishing.

Once I sipped milk out of a saucer  
left for the cat.  
Once I ran across a birthday cake  
With its candles already lit.  
It was terrifying  
And I suppose a bit like  
What your heaven and hell  
combined must be.

## The Clocks of the Dead

One night I went to keep the clock  
company.

It had a loud tick after midnight  
As if it were uncommonly afraid.  
It's like whistling past a graveyard,  
I explained.  
In any case, I told him I  
understood.

Once there were clocks like that  
In every kitchen in America.  
Now the factory's windows are all  
broken.  
The old men on night shift are in  
Charon's boat.  
The day you stop, I said to the  
clock,  
The little wheels they keep in  
reserve  
Will have rolled away  
Into many hard-to-find places.

Just thinking about it, I forgot to  
wind the clock.  
We woke up in the dark.  
How quiet the city is, I said.  
Like the clocks of the dead, my  
wife replied.  
Grandmother on the wall,  
I heard the snows of your  
childhood  
Begin to fall.

## **Wanted Poster**

From the closed, block-long post office  
I heard him whisper  
Out of his flyspecked mouth  
As I hurried by on the street.  
Hunted beast, he said,  
His eyes dark and mean under the  
rusty thumbtacks.  
Who furloughed you today  
To go around grinning at every  
woman you meet?

## **Explaining a Few Things**

Every worm is a martyr,  
Every sparrow subject to injustice,  
I said to my cat,  
Since there was no one else  
around.

It's raining. In spite of their huge  
armies  
What can the ants do?  
And the roach on the wall  
Like a waiter in an empty  
restaurant?

I'm going in the cellar  
To stroke the rat caught in a trap.  
You watch the sky.  
If it clears, scratch on the door.

## The Supreme Moment

As an ant is powerless  
Against a raised boot,  
And only has an instant  
To have a bright idea or two.  
The black boot so polished,  
He can see himself  
Reflected in it, distorted,  
Perhaps made larger  
Into a huge monster ant  
Shaking his arms and legs  
Threateningly?  
The boot may be hesitating,  
Demurring, having misgivings,  
Gathering cobwebs,  
Dew?  
Yes, and apparently no.

## Crazy About Her Shrimp

We don't even take time  
To come up for air.  
We keep our mouths full and busy

Eating bread and cheese  
And smooching in between.

No sooner have we made love  
Than we are back in the kitchen.  
While I chop the hot peppers,  
She wiggles her ass  
And stirs the shrimp on the stove.

How good the wine tastes  
That has run red  
Out of a laughing mouth!  
Down her chin  
And onto her naked tits.

“I’m getting fat,” she says,  
Turning this way and that way  
Before the mirror.  
“I’m crazy about her shrimp!”  
I shout to the gods above.

## Transport

In the frying pan  
On the stove  
I found my love  
And me naked.

Chopped onions  
Fell on our heads  
And made us cry.

It's like a parade,  
I told her, confetti  
When some guy  
Reaches the moon.

"Means of transport,"  
She replied obscurely  
While we fried.  
"Means of transport!"

## **Love Flea**

He took a flea  
From her armpit  
To keep

And cherish  
In a matchbox,  
Even pricking his finger

From time to time  
To feed it  
Drops of blood.

## **What I Overheard**

In summer's idle time,  
When trees grow heavy with  
leaves

And spread shade everywhere  
That is a delight to lie in  
Alone  
Or in the company of a dear friend,

Dreaming or having a quiet talk  
Without looking at each other,  
Until she feels drowsy  
As if after too much wine,  
And you draw close for a kiss  
On her cheek, and instead  
Stay with lips pursed, listening

To a bee make its rounds lazily,  
And a far-off rooster crow  
On the edge of sleep with the  
leaves hushed  
Or rustling, ever so softly,  
About something or other on their  
mind.

## Leaves

Lovers who take pleasure  
In the company of trees,  
Who seek diversion after many  
kisses  
In each other's arms,  
Watching the leaves,

The way they quiver  
At the slightest breath of wind,  
The way they thrill,  
And shudder almost individually,  
One of them beginning to shake  
While the others are still quiet,  
Unaccountably, unreasonably—

What am I saying?  
One leaf in a million more fearful,  
More happy,  
Than all the others?

On this oak tree casting  
Such deep shade,  
And my lids closing sleepily  
With that one leaf twittering  
Now darkly, now luminously.

## **Paper Dolls Cut Out of a Newspaper**

Four of them holding hands like a  
family.  
There's news of war this morning  
And an ad for a coffee they call  
heavenly  
Next to the picture of the  
president.

Hold them up for us to see, little  
Rosie.

Hold them up a bit longer.  
Watch them dance, watch them  
trip  
And make your grandparents  
laugh

With their knives and forks in the  
air,  
While printer's ink comes off your  
fingers  
And blackens your face  
As you hurry to cover your eyes.

## Reading History

*for Hans Magnus*

At times, reading here  
In the library,  
I'm given a glimpse  
Of those condemned to death  
Centuries ago,  
And of their executioners.  
I see each pale face before me  
The way a judge  
Pronouncing a sentence would,  
Marveling at the thought  
That I do not exist yet.

With eyes closed I can hear  
The evening birds.  
Soon they will be quiet  
And the final night on earth  
Will commence  
In the fullness of its sorrow.

How vast, dark, and impenetrable  
Are the early-morning skies  
Of those led to their death  
In a world from which I'm entirely  
absent,  
Where I can still watch  
Someone's slumped back,

Someone who is walking away  
from me  
With his hands tied,  
His graying head still on his  
shoulders,  
Someone who  
In what little remains of his life  
Knows in some vague way about  
me,  
And thinks of me as God,  
As devil.

## Psalm

You've been making up your mind  
a long time,

O Lord, about these madmen  
Running the world. Their reach is  
long,  
And their sharp claws may have  
frightened you.

One of them just cast a shadow  
over me.

The day turned chill. I dangled  
Between terror and speechless  
fury  
In the corner of my son's  
bedroom.

I sought with my eyes you, in  
whom I do not believe.  
You've been busy making the  
flowers pretty,  
The lambs run after their mother,  
Or perhaps you haven't been doing  
even that?

It was spring. The killers were full  
of determination  
And high spirits, and your  
clergymen  
Were right at their side, making  
sure  
Our last words didn't include a  
curse on you.

# Empires

My grandmother prophesied the  
end  
Of your empires, O fools!  
She was ironing. The radio was  
on.  
The earth trembled beneath our  
feet.

One of your heroes was giving a  
speech.  
“Monster,” she called him.  
There were cheers and gun  
salutes for the monster.  
“I could kill him with my bare  
hands,”  
She announced to me.

There was no need to. They were  
all  
Going to the devil any day now.  
“Don’t go blabbering about this to  
anyone,”  
She warned me.  
And pulled my ear to make sure I  
understood.

## Romantic Landscape

To grieve, always to suffer  
At the thought of time passing.  
The outside world shadowy  
As your deepest self.  
Melancholy meadows, trees so  
still,  
They seem afraid of themselves.

The sunset sky for one brief  
moment  
Radiant with some supreme  
insight,  
And then it's over. Tragic theater:  
Blood and mourning at which  
Even the birds fall silent.

Spirit, you who are everywhere  
and nowhere,  
Watch over the lost lamb  
Now that the mouth of the Infinite  
Opens over us  
And its dumb tongue begins to  
move darkly.

## Mystics

Help me to find what I've lost,  
If it was ever, however briefly,

mine,  
You who may have found it.  
Old man praying in the privy,  
Lonely child drawing a secret  
room  
And in it a stopped clock.

Seek to convey its truth to me  
By hints and omens.  
The room in shadow, perhaps the  
wrong room?  
The cockroach on the wall,  
The naked lovers kissing  
On the TV with the sound off.  
I could hear the red faucet drip.

Or else restore to plain view  
What is eternally invisible  
And speaks by being silent.  
Blue distances to the north,  
The fires of the evening to the  
west,  
Christ himself in pain, panhandling  
On the altar of the storefront  
church  
With a long bloody nail in each  
palm.

In this moment of amazement . . .  
Since I do ask for it humbly,  
Without greed, out of true need.  
My teeth chattered so loudly,

My old dog got up to see what's  
the matter.  
Oh divine lassitude, long drawn-  
out sigh  
As the vision came and went.

## Imported Novelties

They didn't answer to repeated  
knocks,  
Or perhaps they were in no hurry.  
On the eighteenth floor  
Even the sunlight moved lazily

Past the floating dust.  
A year could pass here, I thought,  
As in a desert solitude.

"Unknown parties, rarely seen,"  
The elevator operator warned me.  
He wore a New Year's party hat in  
August;  
I was looking for work.

Inside, I imagined rows of file  
cabinets,  
Old desks, dead telephones.  
I could have been sitting at one of  
them myself,  
Like someone doused with  
gasoline

In the moment before the match  
is lit,

But then the elevator took me  
down.

## Via del Tritone

In Rome, on the street of that  
name,  
I was walking alone in the sun  
In the noonday heat, when I saw a  
house  
With shutters closed, the sight of  
which  
Pained me so much, I could have  
Been born there and left  
inconsolably.

The ochre walls, the battered old  
door  
I was tempted to push open and  
didn't,  
Knowing already the coolness of  
the entrance,  
The garden with a palm tree  
beyond,  
And the dark stairs on the left.

Shutters closed to cool shadowy  
rooms

With impossibly high ceilings,  
And here and there a watery  
mirror  
And my pale and contorted face  
To greet me and startle me again  
and again.

“You found what you were looking  
for,”  
I expected someone to whisper.  
But there was no one, neither  
there  
Nor in the street, which was  
deserted  
In that monstrous heat that gives  
birth  
To false memories and tritons.

## **Shaving**

Child of sorrow.  
Old snotnose.  
Stray scrap from the table of the  
gods.  
Toothless monkey.  
Workhorse,  
Wheezing there,  
Coughing too.

The trouble with you is,  
Your body and soul

Don't get along well together.  
Pigsty for a brain,  
Stop them from making faces at  
each other  
In the mirror!  
Then, take off these silly angel  
wings  
From your gorilla suit.

## Trailer Park

Lewis and Clark,  
You never found anything  
To compare.  
Trees without leaves,  
Naked branches,  
And then a snowflake or two  
In flight  
From the darkening sky.

End of town,  
No sign of life  
In any of the trailers  
As you drive by slowly,  
The ground bare,  
Frozen  
This overcast morning  
While he squats absorbed  
In a game.

A small child bent over a toy  
On a road to Calvary.  
In the distance, the crows  
Already perched  
On crosses  
Of unknown prophets  
And thieves.

## The Tower

Five, six chairs piled up in the yard  
And you on top of them  
Sitting like a hanging judge,  
Wearing only pajama bottoms.

The sparrows, what must they  
think?  
If people are watching,  
They are as quiet as goldfish,  
Or expensive cuts of meat.

Hour after hour alone with the sky  
And its mad serenity  
On the rickety, already teetering,  
Already leaning tower.

How frightened the neighbors  
must be.  
Not even a child walks the streets  
In this heat,

Not even a car passes and slows down.

What do you see in the distance, O father?

A windowpane struck by the setting sun?

A game called on account of darkness?

The players like fleas in a convent.

Hell's bells about to toll?

## **The Secret**

I have my excuse, Mr. Death,  
The old note my mother wrote  
The day I missed school.  
Snow fell. I told her my head hurt  
And my chest. The clock struck  
The hour. I lay in my father's bed  
Pretending to be asleep.

Through the window I could see  
The snow-covered roofs. In my mind

I rode a horse; I was in a ship  
On a stormy sea. Then I dozed off.  
When I woke, the house was still.  
Where was my mother?  
Had she written the note and left?

I rose and went searching for her.  
In the kitchen our white cat sat  
Picking at the bloody head of a  
fish.  
In the bathroom the tub was full,  
The mirror and the window fogged  
over.

When I wiped them, I saw my  
mother  
In her red bathrobe and slippers  
Talking to a soldier on the street  
While the snow went on falling,  
And she put a finger  
To her lips, and held it there.

## VII

### ***from WALKING THE BLACK CAT***

#### **Mirrors at 4 A.M.**

You must come to them sideways  
In rooms webbed in shadow,  
Sneak a view of their emptiness  
Without them catching  
A glimpse of you in return.

The secret is,  
Even the empty bed is a burden to  
them,  
A pretense.  
They are more themselves  
keeping  
The company of a blank wall,  
The company of time and eternity

Which, begging your pardon,  
Cast no image  
As they admire themselves in the

mirror,  
While you stand to the side  
Pulling a hanky out  
To wipe your brow surreptitiously.

## **Relaxing in a Madhouse**

They had already attached the  
evening's tears to the  
windowpanes.

The general was busy with the  
ant farm in his head.

The holy saints in their tombs  
were resting, all except one who  
was a prisoner of a dark-haired  
movie star.

Moses wore a false beard and  
so did Lincoln.

X reproduced the Socratic  
method of interrogation by  
demonstrating the ceiling's  
ignorance.

"They stole the secret of the  
musical matchbook from me,"  
confided Adam.

"The world's biggest rooster  
was going to make me famous,"  
said Eve.

Oh to run naked over the  
darkening meadow after the cold  
shower!

In the white pavilion the nurse  
was turning water into wine.  
Hurry home, dark cloud.

## Emily's Theme

My dear trees, I no longer  
recognize you  
In that wintry light.  
You brought me a reminder I can  
do without:  
The world is old, it was always old,  
There's nothing new in it this  
afternoon.  
The garden could've been a  
padlocked window  
Of a pawnshop I was studying  
With every item in it dust-covered.

Each one of my thoughts was  
being ghostwritten  
By anonymous authors. Each time  
they hit  
A cobwebbed typewriter key, I  
shudder.  
Luckily, dark came quickly today.  
Soon the neighbors were burning  
leaves,  
And perhaps a few other things  
too.  
Later, I saw the children run

around the fire,  
Their faces demonic in its flames.

## Cameo Appearance

I had a small, nonspeaking part  
In a bloody epic. I was one of the  
Bombed and fleeing humanity.  
In the distance our great leader  
Crowed like a rooster from a  
balcony,  
Or was it a great actor  
Impersonating our great leader?

That's me there, I said to the  
kiddies.  
I'm squeezed between the man  
With two bandaged hands raised  
And the old woman with her  
mouth open  
As if she were showing us a tooth

That hurts badly. The hundred  
times  
I rewound the tape, not once  
Could they catch sight of me  
In that huge gray crowd,  
That was like any other gray  
crowd.

Trot off to bed, I said finally.  
I know I was there. One take  
Is all they had time for.  
We ran, and the planes grazed our  
hair,  
And then they were no more  
As we stood dazed in the burning  
city,  
But, of course, they didn't film  
that.

## The Friends of Heraclitus

Your friend has died, with whom  
You roamed the streets,  
At all hours, talking philosophy.  
So, today you went alone,  
Stopping often to change places  
With your imaginary companion,  
And argue back against yourself  
On the subject of appearances:  
The world we see in our heads  
And the world we see daily,  
So difficult to tell apart  
When grief and sorrow bow us  
over.

You two often got so carried away  
You found yourselves in strange  
neighborhoods  
Lost among unfriendly folk,

Having to ask for directions  
While on the verge of a supreme  
insight,  
Repeating your question  
To an old woman or a child  
Both of whom may have been  
deaf and dumb.

What was that fragment of  
Heraclitus  
You were trying to remember  
As you stepped on the butcher's  
cat?  
Meantime, you yourself were lost  
Between someone's new black  
shoe  
Left on the sidewalk  
And the sudden terror and  
exhilaration  
At the sight of a girl  
Dressed up for a night of dancing  
Speeding by on roller skates.

## An Address with Exclamation Points

I accused History of gluttony;  
Happiness of anorexia!

O History, cruel and mystical,  
You ate Russia as if it were  
A pot of white beans cooked with  
Sausage, smoked ribs and ham  
hocks!

O Happiness, whose every miserly  
second  
Is brimming with eternity!  
You sat over a dish of vanilla  
custard  
Without ever touching it!

The silent heavens were peeved!  
They made the fair skies at sunset  
Flash their teeth and burp from  
time to time,  
Till our wedding picture slid off  
the wall.

The kitchen is closed! the waiters  
shouted.  
No more vineyard snails in garlic  
butter!  
No more ox tripe fried in onions!  
We have only tears of happiness  
left!

## **What the Gypsies Told My Grandmother While She Was**

## **Still a Young Girl**

War, illness and famine will make  
you their favorite grandchild.

You'll be like a blind person  
watching a silent movie.

You'll chop onions and pieces of  
your heart into the same hot  
skillet.

Your children will sleep in a  
suitcase tied with a rope.

Your husband will kiss your  
breasts every night as if they were  
two gravestones.

Already the crows are grooming  
themselves for you and your  
people.

Your oldest son will lie with flies  
on his lips without smiling or  
lifting his hand.

You'll envy every ant you meet in  
your life and every roadside weed.

Your body and soul will sit on  
separate stoops chewing the  
same piece of gum.

Little cutie, are you for sale? the  
devil will say.

The undertaker will buy a toy for  
your grandson.

Your mind will be a hornet's nest

even on your deathbed.  
You will pray to God but God will  
hang a sign that He's not to be  
disturbed.  
Question no further, that's all I  
know.

## **Little Unwritten Book**

Rocky was a regular guy, a loyal  
friend.  
The trouble was he was only a cat.  
Let's practice, he'd say, and he'd  
pounce  
On his shadow on the wall.  
I have to admit, I didn't learn a  
thing.  
I often sat watching him sleep.  
If the birds tried to have a bit of  
fun in the yard,  
He opened one eye.  
I even commended him for good  
behavior.

He was black except for the white  
gloves he wore.  
He played the piano in the parlor  
By walking over its keys back and  
forth.  
With exquisite tact he chewed my  
ear

If I wouldn't get up from my chair.  
Then one day he vanished. I  
called.

I poked in the bushes.  
I walked far into the woods.

The mornings were the hardest.  
I'd put out  
A saucer of milk at the back door.  
Peekaboo, a bird called out. She  
knew.

At one time we had ten farmhands  
working for us.

I'd make a megaphone with my  
hands and call.

I still do, though it's been years.  
Rocky! I cry.  
And now the bird is silent too.

## **Have You Met Miss Jones?**

I have. At the funeral  
Pulling down her skirt to cover her  
knees  
While inadvertently  
Showing us her cleavage  
Down to the tip of her nipples.

A complete stranger, wobbly on  
her heels,  
Negotiating the exit

With the assembled mourners  
Eyeing her rear end  
With visible interest.

Presidential hopefuls  
Will continue to lie to the people  
As we sit here bowed.

New hatreds will sweep the globe  
Faster than the weather.  
Sewer rats will sniff around  
Lit cash machines  
While we sigh over the departed.

And her beauty will live on, no  
matter  
What any one of these black-clad,  
Grim veterans of every wake,  
Every prison gate and crucifixion,  
Sputters about her courtesy.

Miss Jones, you'll be safe  
With the insomniacs. You'll  
triumph  
Where they pour wine from a  
bottle  
Wrapped in a white napkin,  
Eat sausage with pan-fried  
potatoes,  
And grow misty-eyed  
remembering

Wandered in and out. When they  
conspired  
They spat and pulled down the  
yellow shades,  
Not to raise them or open the  
windows again

Until the summer heat came and  
your students  
Wore dresses with their shoulders  
bared  
As they promenaded with books  
on their heads,  
And the bald customer in the  
barbershop  
Sat sweating while overseeing in  
the mirror  
His three remaining hairs being  
combed.

## Ghosts

It's Mr. Brown looking much better  
Than he did in the morgue.  
He's brought me a huge carp  
In a bloodstained newspaper.  
What an odd visit.  
I haven't thought of him in years.

Linda is with him and so is Sue.  
Two pale and elegant fading

memories  
Holding each other by the hand.  
Even their lipstick is fresh  
Despite all the scientific proofs  
To the contrary.

Is Linda going to cook the fish?  
She turns and gazes in the  
direction  
Of the kitchen while Sue  
Continues to watch me  
mournfully.  
I don't believe any of it,  
And still I'm scared stiff.

I know of no way to respond,  
So I do nothing.  
The windows are open. The air's  
thick  
With the scent of magnolias.  
Drops of evening rain are dripping  
From the dark and heavy leaves.  
I take a deep breath; I close my  
eyes.

Dear specters, I don't even believe  
You are here, so how is it  
You're making me comprehend  
Things I would rather not know  
just yet?

It's the way you stare past me  
At what must already be my own  
ghost,  
Before taking your leave,  
As unexpectedly as you came in,  
Without one of us breaking the  
silence.

## Café Paradiso

My chicken soup thickened with  
pounded young almonds  
My blend of winter greens.  
Dearest tagliatelle with  
mushrooms, fennel, anchovies,  
Tomatoes and vermouth sauce.

Beloved monkfish braised with  
onions, capers  
And green olives.  
Give me your tongue tasting of  
white beans and garlic,  
Sexy little assortment of formaggi  
and frutta!  
I want to drown with you in red  
wine like a pear,  
Then sleep in a macédoine of wild  
berries with cream.

## At the Cookout

The wives of my friends  
Have the air  
Of having shared a secret.  
Their eyes are lowered  
But when we ask them  
What for  
They only glance at each other  
And smile,  
Which only increases our desire  
To know . . .

Something they did  
Long ago,  
Heedless of the consequences,  
That left  
Such a lingering sweetness?

Is that the explanation  
For the way  
They rest their chins  
In the palms of their hands,  
Their eyes closed  
In the summer heat?

Come tell us,  
Or give us a hint.  
Trace a word or just a single letter  
In the wine  
Spilled on the table.

No reply. Both of them  
Lovey-dovey  
With the waning sunlight  
And the evening breeze  
On their faces.

The husbands drinking  
And saying nothing,  
Dazed and mystified as they are  
By their wives' power  
To give  
And take away happiness,  
As if their heads  
Were crawling with snakes.

## Pastoral Harpsichord

A house with a screened-in porch  
On the road to nowhere.  
The missus topless because of  
the heat,  
A bag of Frito Banditos in her lap.  
President Bush on TV  
Watching her every bite.

Poor reception, that's the one  
Advantage we have here,  
I said to the mutt lying at my feet  
And sighing in sympathy.  
On another channel the preacher  
Came chaperoned by his ghost

When he shut his eyes full of tears  
To pray for dollars.

“Bring me another beer,” I said to  
her ladyship,  
And when she wouldn’t oblige,  
I went out to make chamber  
music  
Against the sunflowers in the  
yard.

## **Entertaining the Canary**

Yellow feathers,  
Is it true  
You chirp to the cop  
On the beat?

Desist. Turn your  
Nervous gaze  
At the open bathroom door  
Where I’m soaping

My love’s back  
And putting my chin on her  
shoulder  
So I can do the same for her  
Breasts and crotch.

Sing. Flutter your wings  
As if you were applauding,

Or I'll drape her black slip  
Over your gilded cage.

## Slaughterhouse Flies

Evenings, they ran their bloody  
feet  
Over the pages of my  
schoolbooks.  
With eyes closed, I can still hear  
The trees on our street  
Saying a moody farewell to  
summer,

And someone, under our window,  
recalling  
The silly old cows hesitating,  
Growing suddenly suspicious  
Just as the blade drops down on  
them.

## Blood Orange

It looks so dark the end of the  
world may be near.  
I believe it's going to rain.  
The birds in the park are silent.  
Nothing is what it seems to be,  
Nor are we.

There's a tree on our street so big  
We can all hide in its leaves.  
We won't need any clothes either.  
I feel as old as a cockroach, you  
said.  
In my head, I'm a passenger on a  
ghost ship.

Not even a sigh outdoors now.  
If a child was left on our doorstep,  
It must be asleep.  
Everything is teetering on the edge  
of everything  
With a polite smile.

It's because there are things in  
this world  
That just can't be helped, you said.  
Right then, I heard the blood  
orange  
Roll off the table and with a thud  
Lie cracked open on the floor.

## October Light

That same light by which I saw her  
last  
Made me close my eyes now in  
revery,

Remembering how she sat in the  
garden

With a red shawl over her  
shoulders  
And a small book in her lap,  
Once in a long while looking up

With the day's brightness on her  
face,  
As if to appraise something of  
utmost seriousness  
She has just read at least twice,

With the sky clear and open to  
view,  
Because the leaves had already  
fallen  
And lay still around her two feet.

## Late Train

A few couples walk off into the  
dark.  
In the spot where they vanished,  
The trees are swaying as if in a  
storm  
Without making the slightest  
sound.  
The train, too, sits still in the  
station.

I remember a friend telling me  
once  
How he woke up in a long train  
Put out of service in a railroad  
yard.

In the dining car the tables were  
all set  
With wine glasses and fresh  
flowers,  
And the moon's white glove on  
one of them.

Here, there's nothing but night and  
darkness.

In the empty coach, far in the  
back,  
I think I can see one shadowy  
passenger  
Raising his pale hand to wave to  
me,  
Or to peer at the watch on his  
wrist  
I suspect has stopped running  
years ago.

## Sunset's Coloring Book

The blue trees are arguing with  
the red wind.

The white mare has a peacock for  
a servant.

The hawk brings the night in its  
claws.

The golden mountain doesn't  
exist.

The golden mountain touches the  
black sky.

## **Club Midnight**

Are you the sole owner of a seedy  
nightclub?

Are you its sole customer, sole  
bartender,  
Sole waiter prowling around the  
empty tables?

Do you put on wee-hour girlie  
shows  
With dead stars of black-and-  
white films?

Is your office upstairs over the  
neon lights,  
Or down deep in the dank rat  
cellar?

Are bearded Russian thinkers your  
silent partners?  
Do you have a doorman by the  
name of Dostoyevsky?

Is Fu Manchu coming tonight?  
Is Miss Emily Dickinson?

Do you happen to have an  
immortal soul?  
Do you have a sneaky suspicion  
that you have none?

Is that why you throw a white pair  
of dice,  
In the dark, long after the joint  
closes?

## Late Call

A message for you,  
Piece of shit:

You double-crossed us.  
You were supposed to  
Get yourself crucified  
For the sake of the Truth . . .

Who? Me?

The smallest bread crumb  
Thankfully overlooked on the  
dinner table.  
A born coward.  
A perfect nobody.

And now this!

In the windowpane,  
My mouth gutted open.  
Aghast.  
My judges all wearing black  
hoods.

It must be a joke.  
A big misunderstanding, fellows.  
A wrong number, surely?  
Someone else's dark night of the  
soul.

## Against Winter

The truth is dark under your  
eyelids.  
What are you going to do about it?  
The birds are silent; there's no one  
to ask.  
All day long you'll squint at the  
gray sky.  
When the wind blows you'll shiver  
like straw.

A meek little lamb, you grew your  
wool  
Till they came after you with huge  
shears.  
Flies hovered over your open  
mouth,  
Then they, too, flew off like the  
leaves,  
The bare branches reached after  
them in vain.

Winter coming. Like the last  
heroic soldier  
Of a defeated army, you'll stay at  
your post,  
Head bared to the first snowflake.  
Till a neighbor comes to yell at  
you,  
You're crazier than the weather,  
Charlie.

## The Emperor

Wears a smirk on his face.  
Sits in a wheelchair.  
A black cigarillo in one hand,  
A live fly in the other.

Hey, sweet mama, he shouts.  
I'm wearing my paper crown today

And my wraparound shades  
Just for you!

The Garden of Eden parking lot  
Needs weeding,  
And the candy store  
Is now padlocked.

On the street of Elvis look-alikes,  
I saw the Klan Wizard in his robes.  
I saw the panhandling Jesus  
And heard the wind-chime in his  
head.

•

It's live horror-movie time,  
Says the Emperor,  
A can of bug spray in his hand.  
He lets my frail mother  
Help him cross the street.

She's charmed by his manner and  
exclaims:  
"Such a nice boy!"  
Even with his empty eye sockets  
And his amputated legs.

•

When midnight comes—  
Commands the Emperor—

Put a mike up to the first roach  
Crawling up the kitchen wall.

Let's hear about their exotic  
dancers,  
Their tuxedos-for-rent places,  
And see if their witch trials  
Are just like the ones we have.

The priest with a flycatcher  
On the altar of a church.  
The child left as a baby in a  
shoebox  
Now having a haircut in a  
barbershop.

The Emperor and his three-legged  
dog  
Peeking in through the open door.

.

Make us see what you see in your  
head,  
Emperor.

I see toy soldiers under everyone's  
feet.  
I see a house of cards about to  
fall.  
I see a parrot in a cage admiring  
himself in a mirror.

I see a tall ladder meant to reach  
the moon  
    teeming with demons and  
men.

## VIII

### ***from JACKSTRAWS***

#### **The Voice at 3 A.M.**

Who put canned laughter  
Into my crucifixion scene?

#### **The Soul Has Many Brides**

In India I was greatly taken up  
With a fly in a temple  
Which gave me the distinct  
feeling,  
It was possible, just possible,  
That we had met before.

Was it in Mexico City?  
Climbing the blood-spotted, yellow  
legs  
Of the crucified Christ  
While his eyes grew larger and  
larger.

"May God seat you on the highest  
throne  
Of his invisible Kingdom,"  
A blind beggar said to me in  
English.  
He knew what I saw.

At the saloon where Pancho Villa  
Fired his revolvers at the ceiling,  
On the bare ass of a naked nymph  
Stepping out of a lake in a  
painting,  
And now shamelessly crawling up  
One of Buddha's nostrils,  
Whose smile got even more  
secretive,  
Even more squint-eyed.

## **The Common Insects of North America**

Bumble Bee, Soldier Bug, Mormon Cricket,  
They are all there somewhere  
Behind Joe's Garage, in the tall weeds  
By the snake handler's church,  
On the fringe of a beaver pond.

Painted Beauty is barefoot and  
wears shades.  
Clouded Wood Nymph has been  
sightseeing  
And has caught a shiver. Book  
louse  
Is reading a book about the battle  
of Gettysburg.  
Chinese Mantid has climbed a leaf  
to pray.

Hermit Beetle and Rat Flea are  
feeling amorous  
And are going to the drive-in  
movie.  
Widow Dragonfly doing splits in  
the yard  
Could use some serious talking to  
by her children  
Before she comes to a tragic end.

## **De Occulta Philosophia**

Evening sunlight,  
Your humble servant  
Seeks initiation  
Into your occult ways.

Out of the late-summer sky,  
Its deepening quiet,  
You brought me a summons,

A small share in some large  
And obscure knowledge.

Tell me something of your study  
Of lengthening shadows,  
The blazing windowpanes  
Where the soul is turned into light

—

Or don't just now.

You have the air of someone  
Who prefers to dwell in solitude,  
The one who enters, with gravity  
Of mien and imposing severity,  
A room suddenly rich in enigmas.

O supreme unknowable,  
The seemingly inviolable reserve  
Of your stratagems  
Makes me quake at the thought  
Of you finding me thus

Seated in a shadowy back room  
At the edge of a village  
Bloodied by the setting sun,  
To tell me so much,  
To tell me absolutely nothing.

## **Mother Tongue**

That's the one the butcher  
Wraps in a newspaper  
And throws on the rusty scale  
Before you take it home

Where a black cat will leap  
Off the cold stove  
Licking its whiskers  
At the sound of her name.

## **El libro de la sexualidad**

The pages of all the books are  
blank.  
The late-night readers at the town  
library  
Make no complaints about that.  
They lift their heads solely  
To consult the sign commanding  
silence,  
Before they lick their finger,  
Look sly, appear to be dozing off,  
As they pinch the corner of the  
paper  
Ever so carefully,  
While turning the heavy page.

In the yellow puddle of light,  
Under the lamp with green shade,  
The star charts are all white  
In the big astronomy atlas  
Lying open between my bare  
arms.

At the checkout desk, the young  
Betelgeuse  
Is painting her lips red  
Using my sweating forehead as a  
mirror.  
Her roving tongue  
Is a long-tailed comet in the night  
sky.

## Mummy's Curse

Befriending an eccentric young  
woman  
The sole resident of a secluded  
Victorian mansion.  
She takes long walks in the  
evening rain,  
And so do I, with my hair full of  
dead leaves.

In her former life, she was an  
opera singer.  
She remembers the rich  
Neapolitan pastries,  
Points to a bit of fresh whipped

cream  
Still left in the corner of her lower  
lip,  
Tells me she dragged a wooden  
cross once  
Through a leper town somewhere  
in India.

I was born in Copenhagen, I  
confide in turn.  
My father was a successful  
mortician.  
My mother never lifted her nose  
out of a book.  
Arthur Schopenhauer ruined our  
happy home.  
Since then, a day doesn't go by  
without me  
Sticking a loaded revolver inside  
my mouth.

She had walked ahead of me and  
had turned  
Like a lion tamer, towering with a  
whip in hand.  
Luckily, in that moment, the  
mummy sped by  
On a bicycle carrying someone's  
pizza order  
And cursing the mist and the  
potholes.

## In the Street

He was kneeling down to tie his shoes, which she mistook for a proposal of marriage.

—Arise, arise, sweet man, she said with tears glistening in her eyes while people hurried past them as if stung by bees.

—We shall spend the day riding in a balloon, she announced happily.

—My ears will pop, he objected.

—We'll throw our clothes overboard as we rise higher and higher.

—My cigar that may sputter and cause fireworks.

—Don't worry, my love—she hugged him—even where the clouds are darkest, I have a secret getaway.

## Filthy Landscape

The season of lurid wildflowers Sprawled shamelessly over the meadows,

Drunk with necking and kissing Every hot breeze that comes along.

A small stream opens its legs  
In the half-undressed orchard  
Teeming with foulmouthed birds  
And swarms of smutty fruit flies

In scandalous view of a hilltop  
Wrapped in pink clouds of  
debauchery.  
The sun peeking between them,  
Now and then like a whoremaster.

## **Prison Guards Silhouetted Against the Sky**

I never gave them a thought.  
Years had gone by.  
Many years. I had plenty of other  
things  
To worry about. Today I was in the  
dentist's chair  
When his new assistant walked in  
Pretending not to recognize me in  
the slightest  
As I opened my mouth most  
obediently.

We were necking in some bushes  
by the riverbank,  
And I wanted her to slip off her

bra.  
The sky was darkening, there was  
thunder  
When she finally did, so that the  
first large  
Raindrop wet one of her brown  
nipples.

That was nicer than what she did  
to my mouth now,  
While I winced, while I waited for a  
wink,  
A burst of laughter at the memory  
of the two of us  
Buttoning ourselves, running  
drenched  
Past the state prison with its  
armed guards  
Silhouetted in their towers against  
the sky.

## Jackstraws

My shadow and your shadow on  
the wall  
Caught with arms raised  
In display of exaggerated alarm,  
Now that even a whisper, even a  
breath  
Will upset the remaining straws  
Still standing on the table

In the circle of yellow lamplight,  
These few roof beams and  
columns  
Of what could be a Mogul  
Emperor's palace.  
The Prince chews his long nails,  
The Princess lowers her green  
eyelids.  
They both smoke too much,  
Never go to bed before daybreak.

## School for Visionaries

The teacher sits with eyes closed.  
When you play chess alone it's  
always your move.  
I'm in the last row with a firefly in  
the palm of my hand.  
The girl with red braids, who saw  
the girl with red braids?

.

Do you believe in something truer  
than truth?  
Do you prick your ears even when  
you know damn well no one is  
coming?  
Does that explain the lines on your  
forehead?

Your invisible friend, what  
happened to her?

.

The rushing wind slides to a stop  
to listen.

The prisoner opens the thick  
dictionary lying on his knees.

The floor is cold and his feet are  
bare.

A chew toy of the gods, is that  
him?

Do you stare and stare at every  
black windowpane  
As if it were a photo of your  
unsmiling parents?  
Are you homesick for the house of  
cards?  
The sad late-night cough, is it  
yours?

## **Ambiguity's Wedding**

*for E. D.*

Bride of Awe, all that's left for us  
Are vestiges of a feast table,  
Levitating champagne glasses

In the hands of the erased  
millions.

Mr. So-and-So, the bridegroom  
Of absent looks, lost looks,  
The pale reporter from the awful  
doors  
Before our identity was leased.

At night's delicious close,  
A few avatars of mystery still  
about,  
The spider at his trade,  
The print of his vermillion foot on  
my hand.

A faded woman in sallow dress  
Gravely smudged, her shadow on  
the wall  
Becoming visible, a wintry shadow  
Quieter than sleep.

Soul, take thy risk.  
There where your words and  
thoughts  
Come to a stop,  
Encipher me thus, in marriage.

# Ancient Divinities

They dish out the usual excuses  
to one another:  
Don't forget, darling, we saw it  
coming.  
The new rationality inspired by  
geometry  
Was going to do us in eventually.  
Being immortal  
Was not worth the price we paid in  
ridicule.

I feel like I've been wearing a  
cowbell  
Around my neck for two thousand  
years,  
Says one with a shoulder-length  
blond wig  
Raising a champagne glass to her  
lips  
And acknowledging me at the  
next table,

While at her elbow, next to a  
napkin  
Bloodied by her lipstick, I saw a fly  
crawling  
Out of her overflowing ashtray  
Like some poor Trojan or Greek  
soldier

Who's had enough of wars and  
their poets.

## **Obscurely Occupied**

You are the Lord of the maimed,  
The one bled and crucified  
In a cellar of some prison  
Over which the day is breaking.

You inspect the latest refinements  
Of cruelty. You may even kneel  
Down in wonder. They know  
Their business, these grim fellows

Whose wives and mothers rise  
For the early Mass. You, yourself,  
Must hurry back through the snow  
Before they find your rightful

Place on the cross vacated,  
The few candles burning higher  
In your terrifying absence  
Under the darkly magnified dome.

## **Head of a Doll**

Whose demon are you,  
Whose god? I asked

Of the painted mouth  
Half buried in the sand.

A brooding gull  
Made a brief assessment,  
And tiptoed away  
Nodding to himself.

At dusk a firefly or two  
Dowsed its eye pits.  
And later, toward midnight,  
I even heard mice.

## On the Meadow

With the wind gusting so wildly,  
So unpredictably,  
I'm willing to bet one or two ants  
May have tumbled on their backs  
As we sit here on the porch.

Their feet are pedaling  
Imaginary bicycles.  
It's a battle of wits against  
Various physical laws,  
Plus Fate, plus—  
So-what-else-is-new?

Wondering if anyone's coming to  
their aid  
Bringing cake crumbs,

Miniature editions of the Bible,  
A lost thread or two  
Cleverly tied end to end.

## **Empty Rocking Chair**

Talking to yourself on the front  
porch  
As the night blew in  
Cold and starless.

Everybody's in harm's way,  
I heard you say,  
While a caterpillar squirmed  
And oozed a pool of black liquid  
At your feet.

You turned that notion  
Over and over  
Until your false teeth  
Clamped shut.

## **Three Photographs**

I could've been that kid  
In the old high school photograph  
I found in a junk shop,  
His guileless face circled in black.

In another, there was a view of  
Brooklyn Bridge  
And a tenement roof with pigeons  
flying  
And boys with long poles  
Reaching after them into the  
stormy sky.

In the third, I saw an old man  
kneeling  
With a mouth full of pins  
Before a tall, headless woman in  
white.

I had no money and it was closing  
time.  
I was feeling my way uncertainly  
Toward the exit in the evening  
darkness.

## The Toy

The brightly painted horse  
Had a boy's face,  
And four small wheels  
Under his feet,

Plus a long string  
To pull him this way and that  
Across the floor,  
Should you care to.

A string in waiting  
That slipped away  
With many wiles  
From each and every try.

.

Knock and they'll answer,  
My mother told me,  
So I climbed the four flights  
And went in unannounced.

And found the small toy horse  
For the taking.

In the ensuing emptiness  
And the fading daylight  
That still gives me a shudder  
As if I held in my hand  
The key to mysteries.

.

Where is the Lost and Found  
And the quiet entry,  
The undeveloped film  
Of the few clear moments  
Of our blurred lives?

Where's the drop of blood  
And the tiny nail

That pricked my finger  
As I bent down to touch the toy,  
And caught its eye?

.

Wintry light,  
My memories are  
Steep stairwells  
In dusty buildings  
On dead-end streets,

Where I talk to the walls  
And closed doors  
As if they understood me.

The wooden toy sitting pretty.

No quieter than that.

Like the sound of eyebrows  
Raised by a villain  
In a silent movie.

Psst, someone said behind my  
back.

## Talking to the Ceiling

The moths rustle the pages of  
evening papers.

A beautiful sleepwalker terrorizes  
a small town in Kansas.

I was snooping on myself,  
pointing a long finger.

In my youth, boys used to light  
farts in the dark.

Whose angel wings are that? the  
cop asked me.

If only I had the instruments for a  
one-man band

I'd keep the Grim Reaper laughing  
all the way home.

Oh to press a chimney to my heart  
on a night like this!

2

Madame Zaza, come to think of it,  
stays open late.

Go ahead and cut the cards with  
your eyes closed.

Hangman's convention:  
ropemaker's workshop.

A hundred horror films were  
playing in my head.

Mister, would these shoes look  
good in my coffin? I asked.

Next time, I'll go beddie-bye on a  
ghost ship.

Next time, I'll befriend a few  
thimbleweeds

And roll across the Nevada desert  
as the sun sets.

### 3

Small-beer metaphysician, king of  
birdshit,

Coming down from the trees was  
our first mistake.

The insomniac's brain is a choo-  
choo train

Dodging sleep like a master  
criminal was my only talent.

As for Virginia and her new red  
bikini,

I hear she's been made the official  
match vendor

Of my dark night of the soul.

Unknown namesake in a roach  
hotel, go to sleep.

#### 4

And whose exactly are these  
whispers in my ear?

The colonel on TV praised the use  
of torture.

He had a pair of eyes I once saw  
on a dragon riding

The merry-go-round in Texas with  
a bunch of kids!

The air is sultry, ice melts in a  
glass alongside a dead fly!

Is that Jesus turning up scared at  
my bedroom door

Asking to sleep in my old dog's  
bed?

Selling sticks of gum door-to-door  
will be all our fate.

5

When I toss and turn and bump  
my head against the wall

I'm the first to profusely  
apologize.

That's the way I've been brought  
up.

On the gallows, with a noose  
around my neck,

I'll pass out cookies my mother  
made,

Lift the lid of my coffin to tip the  
gravediggers,

All because some girl thumbed  
her nose at me once.

O memory, making me get out to  
push the hearse!

**6**

There must be millions of zeros  
crowding for warmth

Inside my head and making it  
heavy.

St. John of the Cross and Blaise  
Pascal coming

With a pair of scales to check for  
themselves.

Every day, gents, I'm discovering  
serious new obstacles

To my guaranteed pursuit of  
happiness.

Naked truth you ought to see the  
boobs on her!

Here, throw my hat into the lion's  
cage, I said.

**7**

What could be causing all this,  
Doctor?

The old blues, the kind you never  
lose.

I'm not just any flea on your ass,

I told God apropos of nothing  
earlier this evening.

Your future is your past, the rain  
sang softly

Like a scratchy record left to skip  
on a turntable.

Clock on the wall, have you at  
least once

Taken a sip of the wine eternity  
drinks?

## **Mystic Life**

*for Charles Wright*

It's like fishing in the dark.  
Our thoughts are the hooks,  
Our hearts the raw bait.

We cast the line past all believing  
Into the night sky  
Until it's lost to sight.

The line's long unraveling  
Rising in our throats like a sigh.

.

One little thought  
Leaping into the unthinkable,

Waving an imaginary saber,  
Or perhaps a white flag?

The fly and the spider on the  
ceiling  
Looking on in disbelief.

.

It takes a tiny nibble  
From time to time  
And sends a shiver  
Down our spines.

Like hell it does!

.

Say it in your prayers:

*In that thou has sought me,  
Thou has already found me.*

That's what the leaves in the trees  
Are all excited about tonight.

.

Solitary fishermen  
Lining up like zeros

To infinity.

Therein the mystery  
And the pity.

.

The hook left dangling  
In the abyss.

Nevertheless, aloft,

White shirttails and all—

I'll be damned!

# **IX**

## ***from NIGHT PICNIC***

### **Past-Lives Therapy**

They showed me a dashing officer  
on horseback  
Riding past a burning farmhouse  
And a barefoot woman in a torn  
nightgown  
Throwing rocks at him and calling  
him Lucifer,

Explained to me the cause of  
bloody bandages  
I kept seeing in a recurring dream,  
Cured the backache I acquired  
bowing to my old master,  
Made me stop putting thumbtacks  
round my bed.

When I was a straw-headed boy in  
patched overalls,  
Chickens would freely roost in my

hair.

Some laid eggs as I played my  
ukulele

And my mother and father  
crossed themselves.

Next, I saw myself in an  
abandoned gas station  
Trying to convert a coffin into a  
spaceship,  
Hoarding dead watches in a  
house in San Francisco,  
Spraying obscenities on a highway  
overpass.

Some days, however, they opened  
door after door,

Always to a different room, and  
could not find me.

There'd be a small squeak now  
and then in the dark,

As if a miner's canary just got  
caught in a mousetrap.

## Couple at Coney Island

It was early one Sunday morning,  
So we put on our best rags  
And went for a stroll along the  
boardwalk  
Till we came to a kind of palace

With turrets and pennants flying.  
It made me think of a wedding  
cake  
In the window of a fancy bakery  
shop.

I was warm, so I took my jacket  
off  
And put my arm round your waist  
And drew you closer to me  
While you leaned your head on my  
shoulder.  
Anyone could see we'd made love  
The night before and were still  
giddy on our feet.  
We looked naked in our clothes

Staring at the red and white  
pennants  
Whipped by the sea wind.  
The rides and shooting galleries  
With their ducks marching in line  
Still boarded up and padlocked.  
No one around yet to take our first  
dime.

## Unmade Beds

They like shady rooms,  
Peeling wallpaper,

Cracks on the ceiling,  
Flies on the pillow.

If you are tempted to lie down,  
Don't be surprised,  
You won't mind the dirty sheets,  
The rasp of rusty springs  
As you make yourself comfy.  
The room is a darkened movie  
theater  
Where a grainy  
Black-and-white film is being  
shown.

A blur of disrobed bodies  
In the moment of sweet indolence  
That follows lovemaking,  
When the meanest of hearts  
Comes to believe  
Happiness can last forever.

## Sunday Papers

The butchery of the innocent  
Never stops. That's about all  
We can ever be sure of, love,  
Even more sure than of the roast  
You are bringing out of the oven.

It's Sunday. The congregation  
Files slowly out of the church

Across the street. A good many  
Carry Bibles in their hands.  
It's the vague desire for truth  
And the mighty fear of it  
That make them turn up  
Despite the glorious spring  
weather.

In the hallway, the old mutt  
Just now had the honesty  
To growl at his own image in the  
mirror,  
Before lumbering off to the  
kitchen  
Where the lamb roast sat  
In your outstretched hands  
Smelling of garlic and rosemary.

## Cherry Blossom Time

Gray sewage bubbling up out of  
street sewers  
After the spring rain with the clear  
view  
Of hawkers of quack remedies  
and their customers  
Swarming on the Capitol steps.

At the National Gallery the saints'  
tormented faces  
Suddenly made sense.

Several turned their eyes on me  
As I stepped over the shiny  
parquetry.

And who and what was I, if you  
please?  
A minor provincial grumbler on a  
holiday,  
With hands clasped behind his  
back  
Nodding to every stranger he  
meets

As if this were a 1950 s Fall of the  
Roman Empire movie set,  
And we the bewildered,  
Absurdly costumed, milling extras  
Among the pink cherry blossoms.

## People Eating Lunch

And thinking with each mouthful,  
Or so it appears, seated as they  
are  
At the coffee shop counter, biting  
Into thick sandwiches, chewing  
And deliberating carefully before  
taking  
Another small sip of their sodas.

The gray-haired counterman  
Taking an order has stopped to  
think  
With a pencil paused over his pad,  
The fellow in a blue baseball cap  
And the woman wearing dark  
glasses  
Are both thoroughly baffled  
As they stir and stir their coffees.

If they should look up, they may  
see  
Socrates himself bending over the  
grill  
In a stained white apron and a hat  
Made out of yesterday's  
newspaper,  
Tossing an omelet philosophically,  
In a small frying pan blackened  
with fire.

## **The One to Worry About**

I failed miserably at imagining  
nothing.  
Something always came to keep  
me company:  
A small nameless bug crossing  
the table,  
The memory of my mother, the  
ringing in my ear.

I was distracted and perplexed.  
A hole is invariably a hole in  
something.

About seven this morning, a lone  
beggar  
Waited for me with his small,  
sickly dog  
Whose eyes grew bigger on  
seeing me.  
There goes, the eyes said, that  
nice man  
To whom (appearances to the  
contrary)  
Nothing in this whole wide world  
is sacred.

I was still a trifle upset entering  
the bakery  
When an unknown woman  
stepped out  
Of the back to wait on me dressed  
for a night  
On the town in a low-cut, tight-  
fitting black dress.  
Her face was solemn, her eyes  
averted,  
While she placed a muffin in my  
hand,  
As if all along she knew what I  
was thinking.

## **The Improbable**

There may be words left  
On the blackboard  
In that gray schoolhouse  
Shut for the winter break.

Someone was called upon  
To wipe them off  
And then the bell rang,  
The eraser stayed where it was  
Next to the chalk.

None of them knew  
You'd be passing by this morning  
With your eyes raised  
As if recollecting  
With a thrill of apprehension

Something improbable  
That alone makes us possible  
As it makes you possible  
In this fleeting moment  
Before the lights change.

## **My Father Attributed Immortality to Waiters**

*for Derek Walcott*

For surely, there's no difficulty in  
understanding  
The unreality of an occasional  
customer  
Such as ourselves seated at one  
of the many tables  
As pale as the cloth that covers  
them.

Time in its augmentations and  
diminutions,  
Does not concern these two in the  
least.  
They stand side by side facing the  
street,  
Wearing identical white jackets  
and fixed smiles,

Ready to incline their heads in  
welcome  
Should one of us come through  
the door  
After reading the high-priced  
menu on this street  
Of many hunched figures and  
raised collars.

## The Altar

The plastic statue of the Virgin  
On top of a bedroom dresser

With a blackened mirror  
From a bad-dream grooming  
salon.

Two pebbles from the grave of a  
rock star,  
A small, grinning wind-up monkey,  
A bronze Egyptian coin  
And a red movie-ticket stub.

A splotch of sunlight on the  
framed  
Communion photograph of a boy  
With the eyes of someone  
Who will drown in a lake real soon.

An altar dignifying the god of  
chance.  
What is beautiful, it cautions,  
Is found accidentally and not  
sought after.  
What is beautiful is easily lost.

## **And Then I Think**

I'm just a storefront dentist  
Extracting a blackened tooth at  
midnight.

I chewed on many bitter truths,  
Doc,

My patient says after he spits the  
blood out

Still slumped over, gray-haired  
And smelling of carrion like me.

Of course, I may be the only one  
here,  
And this is a mirror trick I'm  
performing.

Even the few small crumpled bills  
He leaves on the way out, I don't  
believe in.

I may pluck them with a pair of  
wet pincers  
And count them, and then I may  
not.

## **Views from a Train**

Then there's aesthetic paradox  
Which notes that someone else's  
tragedy  
Often strikes the casual viewer  
With the feeling of happiness.

There was the sight of squatters'  
shacks,  
Naked children and lean dogs

running  
On what looked like a town dump,  
The smallest one hopping after  
them on crutches.

All of a sudden we were in a  
tunnel.  
The wheels ground our thoughts  
Back and forth as if they were  
gravel.  
Before long we found ourselves  
on a beach,  
The water blue, the sky cloudless.

Seaside villas, palm trees, white  
sand;  
A woman in a red bikini waved to  
us  
As if she knew each one of us  
Individually and was sorry to see  
us  
Heading so quickly into another  
tunnel.

## Icarus's Dog

He let the whole world know  
What he thought of his master's  
stunt.  
People threw rocks at him,  
But he went on barking.

A hot day's listlessness  
Spread over the sea and the sky.  
Not even a single gull  
To commemorate the event.

Finally, he called it quits and went  
To sniff around some bushes,  
Vanishing for a moment,  
Then reappearing somewhere  
else,

Wagging his tail happily as he  
went  
Down the long, sandy beach,  
Now and then stopping to pee  
And take one more look at the sky.

## **Book Lice**

Munching on pages edged in gold  
In dust-covered Gideon Bibles  
With their tales of God's wrath  
And punishment for the wicked  
In musty drawers of slummy  
motels,

While the thin-legged suicide  
Draws a steaming bath with a  
razor in hand,  
And the gray-haired car thief

Presses his face on the  
windowpane  
Pockmarked with evening rain.

## Three Doors

This one kept its dignity  
Despite being kicked  
And smudged with hands.

Now the whole neighborhood  
Can see what went on last night.  
Someone wanted to get in

Real bad and kept pounding  
With clenched fists,  
Asking God to be his witness.

.

This door's hinges  
Give off a nasty squeak  
To alert the neighbors.

Some fellow with an  
It-pays-to-be-cagey look on his  
face  
Just snuck out.

Yelps of a kicked dog  
And wild laughter

Followed after him.

I heard a screen door  
Creak open at daybreak  
And what sounded like stage  
whisper  
While someone let the cat in

Where it rubbed itself  
Against two bare legs  
And then went and took its first  
lick  
From a saucer of milk.

## **For the Very Soul of Me**

At the close of a sweltering night,  
I found him at the entrance  
Of a bank building made of blue  
glass,  
Crumpled on his side, naked,  
Shielding his crotch with both  
hands,

The missing one, missed by no  
one,  
As all the truly destitute are,  
His rags rolled up into a pillow,  
His mouth open as if he were  
dead,  
Or recalling some debauchery.

Insomnia and the heat drove me  
out early,  
Made me turn down one street  
Instead of another and saw him  
Stretched there, crusted with dirt,  
His feet bruised and swollen.

The lone yellow cab idled at the  
light  
With windows down, the sleepy  
driver  
Threw him a glance, shook his  
head  
And drove down the deserted  
avenue  
The rising sun had made  
beautiful.

## **Car Graveyard**

This is where all our joyrides  
ended:  
Our fathers at the wheel, our  
mothers  
With picnic baskets on their knees  
As we sat in the back with our  
mouths open.

We were driving straight into the  
sunrise.

The country was flat. A city rose  
before us,  
Its windows burning with the  
setting sun.  
All that vanished as we quit the  
highway  
And rolled down a dusky meadow  
Strewn with beer cans and candy  
wrappers,  
Till we came to a stop right here.

First the radio preacher lost his  
voice,  
Then our four tires went flat.  
The springs popped out of the  
upholstery  
Like a nest of rattlesnakes  
As we tried to remain calm.  
Later that night we heard giggles  
Out of a junked hearse—then, not  
a peep  
Till the day of the Resurrection.

## Wooden Church

It's just a boarded-up shack with a  
steeple  
Under the blazing summer sky  
On a back road seldom traveled  
Where the shadows of tall trees  
Graze peacefully like a row of

gallows,  
And crows with no carrion in sight  
Caw to each other of better days.

The congregation may still be at  
prayer.  
Farm folk from flyspecked photos  
Standing in rows with their heads  
bowed  
As if listening to your approaching  
steps.  
So slow they are, they must be  
asking themselves  
How come we are here one  
minute  
And in the very next gone forever?

Try the locked door, then knock  
once.  
The crows will stay out of sight.  
High above you, there is the  
leaning spire  
Still feeling the blow of the last  
storm.  
And then the silence of the  
afternoon . . .  
Even the unbeliever must feel its  
force.

## In Praise of Worms

I only have faith in you, Mr. Worm.  
You are efficient and dependable  
As you go about your grim  
business.

There's a carcass of a dead cat  
Waiting for you in a roadside ditch,

And cries from an outdoor  
birthday party  
As one young girl spins and falls  
With a blindfold over her eyes  
Underneath some trees festooned  
With pennants and Chinese  
lanterns.

A stroke of lightning and a few  
raindrops  
Is all it took to make them run  
indoors  
And restore the peace in their  
yard,  
So you could take cover under a  
leaf  
And go over your appointment  
book,

Cross out a name here and there,  
Ponder an address or two and set  
out  
In your slow way to pay someone

a visit  
Among the rich scents of summer  
night  
And the sky brimming with stars.

## The Lives of the Alchemists

The great labor was always to  
efface oneself,  
Reappear as something entirely  
different:  
The pillow of a young woman in  
love,  
A ball of lint pretending to be a  
spider.

Black boredom of rainy country  
nights  
Thumbing the writings of  
illustrious adepts  
Offering advice on how to proceed  
with the transmutation  
Of a figment of time into eternity.  
The true master, one of them  
counseled,  
Needs a hundred years to perfect  
his art.

In the meantime, the small arcana  
of the frying pan,  
The smell of olive oil and garlic

wafting  
From room to empty room, the  
black cat  
Rubbing herself against your bare  
leg  
While you shuffle toward the  
distant light  
And the tinkle of glasses in the  
kitchen.

X

## ***from* MY NOISELESS ENTOURAGE**

### **Description of a Lost Thing**

It never had a name,  
Nor do I remember how I found it.  
I carried it in my pocket  
Like a lost button  
Except it wasn't a button.

Horror movies,  
All-night cafeterias,  
Dark barrooms  
And poolhalls,  
On rain-slicked streets.

It led a quiet, unremarkable  
existence  
Like a shadow in a dream,  
An angel on a pin,  
And then it vanished.  
The years passed with their row

Of nameless stations,  
Till somebody told me *this is it!*  
And fool that I was,  
I got off on an empty platform  
With no town in sight.

## **Self-Portrait in Bed**

For imaginary visitors, I had a  
chair  
Made of cane I found in the trash.  
There was a hole where its seat  
was  
And its legs were wobbly  
But it still gave a dignified  
appearance.

I myself never sat in it, though  
With the help of a pillow one could  
do that  
Carefully, with knees drawn  
together  
The way she did once,  
Leaning back to laugh at her  
discomfort.

The lamp on the night table  
Did what it could to bestow  
An air of mystery to the room.

There was a mirror, too, that made  
Everything waver as in a fishbowl

If I happened to look that way,  
Red-nosed, about to sneeze,  
With a thick wool cap pulled over  
my ears,  
Reading some Russian in bed,  
Worrying about my soul, I'm sure.

## To Dreams

I'm still living at all the old  
addresses,  
Wearing dark glasses even  
indoors,  
On the hush-hush sharing my bed  
With phantoms, visiting the  
kitchen

After midnight to check the  
faucet.  
I'm late for school, and when I get  
there  
No one seems to recognize me.  
I sit disowned, sequestered and  
withdrawn.

These small shops open only at  
night  
Where I make my unobtrusive

purchases,  
These back-door movie houses in  
seedy neighborhoods  
Still showing grainy films of my  
life.

The hero always full of  
extravagant hope  
Losing it all in the end?—whatever  
it was—  
Then walking out into the cold,  
disbelieving light  
Waiting close-lipped at the exit.

## **My Noiseless Entourage**

We were never formally  
introduced.  
I had no idea of their number.  
It was like a discreet entourage  
Of homegrown angels and  
demons  
All of whom I had met before  
And had since largely forgotten.

In time of danger, they made  
themselves scarce.  
Where did they all vanish to?  
I asked some felon one night  
While he held a knife to my throat,

But he was spooked too,  
Letting me go without a word.

It was disconcerting, downright  
frightening  
To be reminded of one's solitude,  
Like opening a children's book—  
With nothing better to do—reading  
about stars,  
How they can afford to spend  
centuries  
Traveling our way on a glint of  
light.

## **Used Clothing Store**

A large stock of past lives  
To rummage through  
For the one that fits you  
Cleaned and newly pressed,  
Yet frayed at the collar.

A dummy dressed in black  
Is at the door to serve you.  
His eyes won't let you go.  
His mustache looks drawn  
With a tip of a dead cigar.

Towers of pants are tilting,  
As you turn to flee,  
Dead men's hats are rolling

On the floor, hurrying  
To escort you out the door.

## Voyage to Cythera

I'll go to the island of Cythera  
On foot, of course,  
I'll set out some May evening,  
Light as a feather,  
There where the goddess is fabled  
to have risen  
Naked from the sea—

I'll jump over a park fence  
Right where the lilacs are  
blooming  
And the trees are feverish with  
new leaves.  
The swing I saw in a painting once  
Is surely here somewhere?

And so is the one in a long white  
dress,  
With eyes blindfolded  
Who gropes her way down a  
winding path  
Among her masked companions  
Wearing black capes and carrying  
daggers.

This is all a dream, fellows,  
I'll say after they empty my  
pockets.  
And so are you, my love,  
Carrying a Chinese lantern  
And running off with my wallet  
In the descending darkness.

## Used Book Store

Lovers hold hands in never-  
opened novels.  
The page with a recipe for  
cucumber soup is missing.  
A dead man writes of his happy  
childhood on a farm,  
Of riding in a balloon over Lake  
Erie.  
  
A sudden draft shuts his book in  
my hand,  
While a philosopher asks how is it  
possible  
To maintain the theologically  
orthodox doctrine  
Of eternal punishment of the  
damned?

Let's see. There may be sand  
among the pages  
Of a travel guide to Egypt or even

a dead flea  
That once bit the ass of the  
mysterious Abigail  
Who scribbled her name teasingly  
with an eye pencil.

## Battling Grays

Another grim-lipped day coming  
our way  
Like a gray soldier  
From the Civil War monument  
Footloose on a narrow country  
road  
With few homes lately foreclosed,  
Their windows the color of rain  
puddles  
About to freeze, their yards  
choked  
With weeds and rusty cars.

Small hills like mounds of ashes  
Of your dead cigar, general,  
Standing bewhiskered and  
surveying  
What the light is in no hurry  
To fall upon, including, of course,  
Your wound, red and bubbling  
Like an accordion, as you raise  
your saber  
To threaten the clouds in the sky.

# Sunlight

As if you had a message for me

...

Tell me about the grains of dust  
On my night table?

Is any one of them worth your  
trouble?

Your burglaries leave no  
thumbprint.

Mine, too, are silent.

I do my best imagining at night,  
And you do yours with the help of  
shadows.

Like conspirators hatching a plot,  
They withdrew one by one  
Into corners of the room.  
Leaving me the sole witness  
Of your burning oratory.

If you did say something, I'm none  
the wiser.

The breakfast finished,  
The coffee dregs were  
unenlightening.

Like a lion cage at feeding time—  
The floor at my feet had turned  
red.

## Minds Roaming

My neighbor was telling me  
About her blind cat  
Who goes out at night—  
Goes where? I asked.

Just then my dead mother called  
me in  
To wash my hands  
Because supper was on the table:  
The little mouse the cat caught.

## Talk Radio

“I was lucky to have a Bible with  
me.  
When the space aliens abducted  
me . . .”

America, I shouted at the radio,  
Even at 2 A.M. you are a loony bin!

No, I take it back!  
You are a stone angel in the  
cemetery

Listening to the geese in the sky,  
Your eyes blinded by snow.

## **My Turn to Confess**

A dog trying to write a poem on  
why he barks,  
That's me, dear reader!  
They were about to kick me out of  
the library  
But I warned them,  
My master is invisible and all-  
powerful.  
Still, they kept dragging me out by  
the tail.

In the park the birds spoke freely  
of their own vexations.  
On a bench, I saw an old woman  
Cutting her white curly hair with  
imaginary scissors  
While staring into a small pocket  
mirror.

I didn't say anything then,  
But that night I lay slumped on the  
floor,  
Chewing on a pencil,  
Sighing from time to time,  
Growling, too, at something out  
there  
I could not bring myself to name.

## On the Farm

The cows are to be slaughtered  
And the sheep, too, of course.  
The same for the hogs sighing in  
their pens—  
And as for the chickens,

Two have been killed for dinner  
tonight,  
While the rest peck side by side  
As the shadows lengthen in the  
yard  
And bales of hay turn gold in the  
fields.

One cow has stopped grazing  
And has looked up puzzled  
Seeing a little white cloud  
Trot off like a calf into the sunset.

On the porch someone has  
pressed  
A rocking chair into service  
But we can't tell who it is—a  
stranger,  
Or that boy of ours who never has  
anything to say?

## **Snowy Morning Blues**

The translator is a close reader.  
He wears thick glasses  
As he peers out the window  
At the snowy fields and bushes  
That are like a sheet of paper  
Covered with quick scribble  
In a language he knows well  
enough,  
Without knowing any words in it,

Only what the eyes discern,  
And the heart intuits of its idiom.  
So quiet now, not even a faint  
Rustle of a page being turned  
In a white and wordless dictionary  
For the translator to avail himself  
Before whatever words are left  
Grow obscure in the coming  
darkness.

## **To Fate**

You were always more real to me  
than God.  
Setting up the props for a tragedy,  
Hammering the nails in  
With only a few close friends  
invited to watch.

Just to be neighborly, you made a  
pretty girl lame,  
Ran over a child with a  
motorcycle.

I can think of many other  
examples.

Ditto: How the two of us keep  
meeting.

A fortunetelling gumball machine  
in Chinatown

May have the answer,  
An old creaky door opening in a  
horror film,  
A pack of cards I left on a beach.

I can feel you snuggle close to me  
at night,

With your hot breath, your cold  
hands—

And me already like an old piano  
Dangling out of a window at the  
end of a rope.

## Sweetest

Little candy in death's candy shop,  
I gave your sugar a lick  
When no one was looking,

Took you for a ride on my tongue  
To all the secret places,

Trying to appear above suspicion  
As I went about inspecting the  
confectionary,  
Greeting the owner with a nod  
With you safely tucked away  
And melting to nothing in my  
mouth.

## **The Tragic Sense of Life**

Because few here recall the old  
wars,  
The burning of Atlanta and  
Dresden,  
The great-uncle who lies in  
Arlington,  
Or that Vietnam vet on crutches  
Who tries to bum a dime or a  
cigarette.

The lake is still in the early-  
morning light.  
The road winds; I slow down to let  
A small, furry animal cross in a  
hurry.  
The few remaining wisps of fog  
Are like smoke rising out of  
cannons.

In one little town flags fly over  
dark houses.  
Outside a church made of gray  
stone,  
The statue of the Virgin blesses  
the day.  
Her son is inside afraid to light a  
candle,  
Saying, *Forgive one another, clothe  
the naked.*

Niobe and her children may live  
here.  
As for me, I don't know where I am  
—  
And here I'm already leaving in a  
hurry  
Down a stretch of road with little  
to see,  
Dark woods everywhere closing in  
on me.

## In the Planetarium

Never-yet-equaled, wide-screen  
blockbuster  
That grew more and more  
muddled  
After a spectacular opening shot.  
The pace, even for the most

patient  
Killingly slow despite the promise  
Of a show-stopping, eye-popping  
ending:  
The sudden shriveling of the  
whole  
To its teensy starting point,  
erasing all—  
Including this bag of popcorn we  
are sharing.

Yes, an intriguing but finally  
irritating  
Puzzle with no answer  
forthcoming tonight  
From the large cast of stars and  
galaxies  
In what may be called a  
prodigious  
Expenditure of time, money and  
talent.  
“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” I  
said  
Just as her upraised eyes grew  
moist  
And she confided to me, much too  
loudly,  
“I have never seen anything so  
beautiful.”

# The Absentee Landlord

Surely, he could make it easier  
When it comes to inquiries  
As to his whereabouts.  
Rein in our foolish speculations,  
Silence our voices raised in anger,

And not leave us alone  
With that curious feeling  
We sometimes have  
Of there being a higher purpose  
To our residing here  
Where nothing works  
And everything needs fixing.

The least he could do is put up a sign:  
AWAY ON BUSINESS  
So we could see it,  
In the graveyard where he collects the rent  
Or in the night sky  
Where we address our complaints to him.

## **My Wife Lifts a Finger to Her Lips**

Night is coming.  
A lone hitchhiker  
Holds up a homemade sign.

Masked figures  
Around a gambling table?  
No, those are scarecrows in a  
field.

At the neighbors',  
Where they adore a black cat,  
There's no light yet.

Dear Lord, can you see  
The fleas run for cover?  
No, he can't see the fleas.

## **Pigeons at Dawn**

Extraordinary efforts are being  
made  
To hide things from us, my friend.  
Some stay up into the wee hours  
To search their souls.  
Others undress each other in  
darkened rooms.

The creaky old elevator  
Took us down to the icy cellar first  
To show us a mop and a bucket  
Before it deigned to ascend again  
With a sigh of exasperation.

Under the vast, early-dawn sky  
The city lay silent before us.  
Everything on hold:  
Rooftops and water towers,  
Clouds and wisps of white smoke.

We must be patient, we told  
ourselves,  
See if the pigeons will coo now  
For the one who comes to her  
window  
To feed them angel cake,  
All but invisible, but for her slender  
arm.

## ***from THAT LITTLE SOMETHING***

### **Walking**

I never run into anyone from the old days.

It's summer and I'm alone in the city.

I enter stores, apartment houses, offices

And find nothing remotely familiar.

The trees in the park—were they always so big?

And the birds so hidden, so quiet?  
Where is the bus that passed this way?

Where are the greengrocers and hairdressers,

And that schoolhouse with the red fence?

Miss Harding is probably still at  
her desk,  
Sighing as she grades papers late  
into the night.  
The bummer is, I can't find the  
street.

All I can do is make another tour  
of the neighborhood,  
Hoping I'll meet someone to show  
me the way  
And a place to sleep, since I've no  
return ticket  
To wherever it is I came from  
earlier this evening.

## **That Little Something**

*for Li-Young Lee*

The likelihood of ever finding it is  
small.  
It's like being accosted by a  
woman  
And asked to help her look for a  
pearl  
She lost right here in the street.

She could be making it all up,  
Even her tears, you say to yourself,

As you search under your feet,  
Thinking, Not in a million years . . .

It's one of those summer  
afternoons  
When one needs a good excuse  
To step out of a cool shade.  
In the meantime, what ever  
became of her?

And why, years later, do you still,  
Off and on, cast your eyes to the  
ground  
As you hurry to some appointment  
Where you are now certain to  
arrive late?

## **Night Clerk in a Roach Hotel**

I'm the furtive inspector of dimly  
lit corridors,  
Dead lightbulbs and red exit signs,  
Doors that show traces  
Of numerous attempts at violent  
entry,

Is that the sound of a maid  
making a bed at midnight?  
The rustle of counterfeit bills  
Being counted in the wedding  
suite?

A fine-tooth comb passing  
through a head of gray hair?

*Eternity is a mirror and a spider  
web,*

Someone wrote with lipstick in the  
elevator.

I better get the passkey and see  
for myself.

I better bring along a book of  
matches too.

## **Waiting for the Sun to Set**

These rows of tall palm trees,  
White villas and white hotels  
Fronting the beach and the sea  
Seem most improbable to me

Whiling away the afternoon  
In a cane rocking chair  
On a small, secluded veranda,  
Overrun with exotic flowers

I don't even know the names of,  
Raised as I was by parents  
Who kept the curtains drawn,  
The lights low, the stove unlit,

Leaving me as wary as they'd be  
At first seeing oranges in a tree,

Women running bare-breasted  
Over pink sands in a blue dusk.

## House of Cards

I miss you winter evenings  
With your dim lights.  
The shut lips of my mother  
And our held breaths  
As we sat at a dining room table.

Her long, thin fingers  
Stacking the cards,  
Then waiting for them to fall.  
The sound of boots in the street  
Making us still for a moment.

There's no more to tell.  
The door is locked,  
And in one red-tinted window,  
A single tree in the yard,  
Stands leafless and misshapen.

## Aunt Dinah Sailed to China

Bearded ancestors, what became  
of you?  
Have you gone and hid yourself  
In some cabin in the woods

To listen to your whiskers grow in  
peace?

Clergymen patting chin curtains,  
Soldiers with door knockers,  
Sickly youths with goatees,  
Town drunks proud of their  
ducktails.

Cousin Kate, was that a real  
mustache  
You wore as you stood in church  
Waiting for your bridegroom  
To run up the stairs someday?

And you, Grandpa, when you  
shouted at God  
To do something about the world,  
He kept quiet and let the night fall,  
Seeing that your beard was whiter  
than his.

## To Laziness

Only you understood  
How little time we are given,  
Not enough to lift a finger.  
The voices on the stairs,  
Thoughts too quick to pursue,  
What do they all matter?  
When eternity beckons.

The heavy curtains drawn,  
The newspapers unread.  
The keys collecting dust.  
The flies either sluggish or dead.  
The bed like a slow boat,  
With its one listless sail  
Made of cigarette smoke.

When I did move at last,  
The stores were closed.  
Was it already Sunday?  
The weddings and funerals were  
over.  
The one or two white clouds left  
Above the dark rooftops,  
Not sure which way to go.

## Listen

Everything about you,  
My life, is both  
Make-believe and real.  
We are a couple  
Working the night shift  
In a bomb factory.

“Come quietly,” one says  
To the other  
As he takes her by the hand  
And leads her

To a rooftop  
Overlooking the city.

At this hour, if one listens  
Long and hard,  
One can hear a fire engine  
In the distance,  
But not the cries for help,

Just the silence  
Growing deeper  
At the sight of a small child  
Leaping out of a window  
With its nightclothes on fire.

## Encyclopedia of Horror

Nobody reads it but the  
insomniacs.  
How strange to find a child,  
Slapped by his mother only this  
morning,  
And the mad homeless woman  
Who squatted to urinate in the  
street.

Perhaps they've missed  
someone?  
That smoke-shrouded city after a  
bombing raid,  
The corpses like cigarette butts

In a dinner plate overflowing with  
ashes.  
But no, everyone is here.

O were you to come, invisible  
tribunal,  
There'd be too many images to  
thumb through,  
Too many stories to listen to,  
Like the one about guards playing  
cards  
After they were done beating their  
prisoner.

## Dance of the Macabre Mice

*"In the land of turkeys in turkey  
weather"*

—W. STEVENS

The president smiles to himself;  
he loves war  
And another one is coming soon.  
Each day we can feel the  
merriment mount  
In government offices and TV  
studios  
As our bombs fall on distant  
countries.

The mortuaries are being  
scrubbed clean.  
Soon they'll be full of grim young  
men laid out in rows.  
Already the crowd gurgles with  
delight  
At the bird-sweet deceits, the  
deep-throated lies  
About our coming battles and  
victories.

Dark-clad sharpshooters on  
rooftops  
Are scanning the mall for  
suspicious pigeons,  
Blind men waving their canes in  
the air,  
Girls with short skirts and ample  
bosoms  
Reaching deep into their purses  
for a lighter.

## **The Lights Are On Everywhere**

The Emperor must not be told  
night is coming.  
His armies are chasing shadows,  
Arresting whippoorwills and  
hermit thrushes  
And setting towns and villages on  
fire.

In the capital, they go around  
confiscating  
Clocks and watches, burning  
heretics  
And painting the sunrise above  
the rooftops  
So we can wish each other good  
morning.

The rooster brought in chains is  
crowing,  
The flowers in the garden have  
been forced to stay open,  
And still yet dark stains spread  
over the palace floors  
Which no amount of scrubbing  
will wipe away.

## **Memories of the Future**

There are one or two murderers in  
any crowd.  
They do not suspect their  
destinies yet.  
Wars are started to make it easy  
for them  
To kill that woman pushing a baby  
carriage.

The animals in the zoo don't hide  
their worry.  
They pace their cages or shy away  
from us  
Listening to something we can't  
hear yet:  
The coffin makers hammering  
their nails.

The strawberries are already in  
season  
And so are the scallions and  
radishes.  
A young man buys roses, another  
rides  
A bike through the traffic using no  
hands.

Old fellow bending over the curb  
to vomit,  
Betake thee to thy own place of  
torment.  
The sky at sunset is red with  
grilling coals.  
A thick glove reaches through the  
fire after us.

## In the Junk Store

A small, straw basket  
Full of medals

From good old wars  
No one recalls.

I flipped one over  
To feel the pin  
That once pierced  
The hero's swelling chest.

## **Madmen Are Running the World**

Watch it spin like a wheel  
And get stuck in the mud.

The truck is full of caged chickens  
Squawking about their fate.

The driver has gone to get help  
In a dive with a live band.

Myrtle, Phyllis, or whatever they  
call you girls!  
Get some shuteye while you can.

## **In the Afternoon**

The devil likes the chicken coop.  
He lies on a bed of straw  
Watching the snow fall.

The hens fetch him eggs to suck,  
But he's not in the mood.

Cotton Mather is coming tonight,  
Bringing a young witch.  
Her robe already licked by flames,  
Her bare feet turning pink  
While she steps to the woodpile,

Saying a prayer; her hands  
Like mating butterflies,  
Or are they snowflakes?  
As the smoke rises,  
And the gray afternoon light  
returns

With its wild apple tree  
And its blue pickup truck,  
The one with a flat tire,  
And the rusted kitchen stove  
They meant to take to the dump.

## Prophesy

The last customer will stagger out  
of the door.  
Cooks will hang their white hats.  
Chairs will climb on the tables.  
A broom will take a lazy stroll into  
a closet.

The waiters will kick off their  
shoes.  
The cat will get a whole trout for  
dinner.  
The cashier will stop counting  
receipts,  
Scratch her ass with a pencil and  
sigh.

The boss will pour himself  
another brandy.  
The mirrors will grow tired of  
potted palms  
And darken slowly the way they  
always do  
When someone runs off with a  
roast chicken.

## A Row of High Windows

Sky's gravedigger,  
Bird catcher,  
Dark night's match seller—  
Or whatever you are?

A book-lined tomb,  
Pots and pans music hall,  
Insomnia's sick nurse,  
Burglar's blind date.

Also you  
Stripper's darkened stage  
Right next to a holy martyr  
Being flayed by the setting sun.

## **Secret History**

Of the light in my room:  
Its mood swings,  
Dark-morning glooms,  
Summer ecstasies.

Spider on the wall,  
Lamp burning late,  
Shoes left by the bed,  
I'm your humble scribe.

Dust balls, simple souls  
Conferring in the corner.  
The pearl earring she lost,  
Still to be found.

Silence of falling snow,  
Night vanishing without trace,  
Only to return.  
I'm your humble scribe.

## **Wire Hangers**

All they need  
Is one little red dress  
To start swaying  
In that empty closet

For the rest of them  
To nudge each other,  
Clicking like knitting needles  
Or disapproving tongues.

## **Labor and Capital**

The softness of this motel bed  
On which we made love  
Demonstrates to me in an  
impressive manner  
The superiority of capitalism.

At the mattress factory, I imagine,  
The employees are happy today.  
It's Sunday and they are working  
Extra hours, like us, for no pay.

Still, the way you open your legs  
And reach for me with your hand  
Makes me think of the Revolution,  
Red banners, crowd charging.

Someone stepping on a soapbox  
As the flames engulf the palace,  
And the old prince in full view  
Steps to his death from a balcony.

## The Bather

Where the path to the lake twists  
Out of sight, a puff of dust,  
The kind bare feet make running.  
A low branch heavy with leaves  
Swaying momentarily  
In the dense and somber shade.

A late bather disrobing for a dip,  
Pinned hair coming undone soon  
to float  
As she flips on her back letting  
The sleepy current take her  
Over the dark water to where the  
sky  
Opens wide, the night blurring

Her nakedness, the silence thick,  
Treetops like charred paper edges,  
Even the insects oddly reclusive,  
The rare breath of wind in the  
leaves  
Fooling me to look once again,  
Until the chill made me rise and  
go in.

# Eternities

Discreet reader of discreet lives.  
Chairs no one ever sits in.  
Motes of dust, their dancing days  
done.  
Schools of yellow fish  
On the peeling wallpaper  
Keeping their eyes on you.  
It's late for today, late.  
A small crucifix over the bed  
Watches over a stopped clock.

.

Sewing room, linty daylight  
Through a small window.  
You will never be in my shoes,  
Eternity.  
I come with an expiration date.  
My scissors cut black cloth.  
I stick silver pins into a tailor's  
dummy,  
Muttering some man's name  
While aiming at its heart.

.

Raleigh played cards with his  
executioners.  
I sit over a dead mouse in the  
kitchen.

Hot night, the windows open,  
The air rich with the scents of  
lilacs  
And banked fires of backyard  
grills.  
My lovely neighbor must be  
sleeping naked,  
Or lighting a match to see what  
time it is.

•

The torment of branches in the  
wind.  
Is the sea hearing their  
confession?  
The little white clouds must think  
so.  
They are rushing over to hear.  
The ship on the way to paradise  
Seems stuck on the horizon,  
Pinned by one golden pin of  
sunlight.  
Only the great rocks act as if  
nothing's the matter.

•

In a city where so much is hidden:  
The crimes, the riches, the  
beautiful women,  
You and I were lost for hours.

We went in to ask a butcher for directions.  
He sat playing the accordion.  
The lambs had their eyes closed in bliss,  
But not the knives, his evil little helpers.  
Come right in, folks, he said.

.

Conscience, that awful power,  
With its vast network of spies,  
Secret arrests at night,  
Dreaded prisons and reform schools,  
Beatings and forced confessions,  
Wee-hour crucifixions.  
A small, dead bird in my hand  
Is all the evidence they had.

.

The sprawling meadow bordered by a stream,  
Naked girl on horseback.  
Yes, I do remember that.  
Sunlight on the outhouse wall,  
One little tree in the yard afraid of darkness,  
The voice of the hermit thrush.

.

Thoughts frightened of the light,  
Frightened of each other.  
They listen to a clock ticking.  
Like flock of sheep led to  
slaughter,  
The seconds keep a good pace,  
Stick together, don't look back,  
All worried, as they go,  
What their shepherd may be  
thinking.

.

A sough of wind in the open  
window  
Making the leaves sigh.  
“I come to you like one  
Who is dying of love,”  
God said to Christine Ebner  
On this dull, sultry night.  
“I come to you with the desire  
Of bridegroom for his bride.”

.

Soul's jukebox  
Playing golden oldies  
In the sky  
Strewn with stars.  
When I ask God

What size coin it takes  
I'm greeted  
With stunned silence.

## Eternity's Orphans

One night you and I were walking.  
The moon was so bright  
We could see the path under the  
trees.  
Then the clouds came and hid it  
So we had to grope our way  
Till we felt the sand under our  
bare feet,  
And heard the pounding waves.

Do you remember telling me,  
"Everything outside this moment  
is a lie"?  
We were undressing in the dark  
Right at the water's edge  
When I slipped the watch off my  
wrist  
And without being seen or saying  
Anything in reply, I threw it into the  
sea.

## XII

# ***from* MASTER OF DISGUISES**

## **Master of Disguises**

Surely, he walks among us  
unrecognized:  
Some barber, store clerk, delivery  
man,  
Pharmacist, hairdresser,  
bodybuilder,  
Exotic dancer, gem cutter, dog  
walker,  
The blind beggar singing, O Lord,  
remember me,

Some window decorator starting a  
fake fire  
In a fake fireplace while mother  
and father watch  
From the couch with their frozen  
smiles  
As the street empties and the time

comes  
For the undertaker and the last  
waiter to head home.

O homeless old man, standing in a  
doorway  
With your face half hidden,  
I wouldn't even rule out the black  
cat crossing the street,  
The bare lightbulb swinging on a  
wire  
In a subway tunnel as the train  
comes to a stop.

## Nineteen Thirty-eight

That was the year the Nazis  
marched into Vienna,  
Superman made his debut in  
Action Comics,  
Stalin was killing off his fellow  
revolutionaries,  
The first Dairy Queen opened in  
Kankakee, Ill.,  
As I lay in my crib peeing in my  
diapers.

“You must’ve been a beautiful  
baby,” Bing Crosby sang.  
A pilot the newspapers called  
Wrong Way Corrigan

Took off from New York heading  
for California  
And landed instead in Ireland, as I  
watched my mother  
Take a breast out of her blue robe  
and come closer.

There was a hurricane that  
September causing a movie  
theater  
At Westhampton Beach to be  
lifted out to sea.  
People worried the world was  
about to end.  
A fish believed to have been  
extinct for seventy million years  
Came up in a fishing net off the  
coast of South Africa.

I lay in my crib as the days got  
shorter and colder,  
And the first heavy snow fell in the  
night  
Making everything very quiet in  
my room.  
I thought I heard myself cry for a  
long, long time.

## Preachers Warn

This peaceful world of ours is  
ready for destruction—  
And still the sun shines, the  
sparrows come  
Each morning to the bakery for  
crumbs.  
Next door, two men deliver a bed  
for a pair of newlyweds  
And stop to admire a bicycle  
chained to a parking meter.  
Its owner is making lunch for his  
ailing grandmother.  
He heats the soup and serves it to  
her in a bowl.

The windows are open, there's a  
warm breeze.  
The young trees on our street are  
delirious to have leaves.  
Italian opera is on the radio, the  
volume too high.  
*Brevi e tristi giorni visse*, a baritone  
sings.  
Everyone up and down our block  
can hear him.  
Something about the days that  
remain for us to enjoy  
Being few and sad. Not today,  
Maestro Verdi!

At the hairdresser's a girl leaps  
out of a chair,  
Her blond hair bouncing off her  
bare shoulders  
As she runs out the door in her  
high heels.

"I must be off," says the  
handsome boy to his  
grandmother.

His bicycle is where he left it.  
He rides it casually through the  
heavy traffic  
His white shirttails fluttering  
behind him  
Long after everyone else has  
come to a sudden stop.

## Old Man

Backed myself into a dark corner  
one day,  
Found a boy there  
Forgotten by teachers and  
classmates,  
His shoulders slumped,  
The hair on his head already gray.  
Friend, I said.

While you stood here staring at  
the wall,  
They shot a president,

Some guy walked on the moon,  
Dolly, the girl we all loved,  
Took too many sleeping pills and  
died  
In a hotel room in Santa Monica.

Now and then I thought of you,  
Listening to the squeak of the  
chalk  
On the blackboard,  
The sighs and whispers  
Of unknown children  
Bent over their lessons,  
The mice running in the night.

Visions of unspeakable loveliness  
Must've come to you in your  
misery:  
Cloudless skies on long June  
evenings,  
Trees full of cherries in our  
orchard,  
To make you ache and want to be  
with me,  
Driving a cab in New York City.

## Nancy Jane

Grandma laughing on her  
deathbed.  
Eternity, the quiet one, listening in.

Like moths around an oil lamp we  
were.

Like rag dolls tucked away in the  
attic.

In walked a cat with a mouthful of  
feathers.

(How about that?)

A dark little country store full of  
gravediggers' children  
buying candy.

(That's how we looked that night.)

The young man pumping gas  
spoke of his friends: the clouds.  
It was such a sad story, it made  
everyone laugh.

A bird called out of a tree, but  
received no answer.

The beauty of that last moment  
Like a red sail on the bay at  
sunset,

Or like a wheel breaking off a car  
And roaming the world on its own.

## **Carrying On Like a Crow**

Are you authorized to speak  
For these trees without leaves?  
Are you able to explain  
What the wind intends to do  
With a man's shirt and a woman's  
nightgown  
Left on the laundry line?  
What do you know about dark  
clouds?  
Ponds full of fallen leaves?  
Old-model cars rusting in a  
driveway?  
Who gave you the permission  
To look at the beer can in a ditch?  
The white cross by the side of the  
road?  
The swing set in the widow's yard?  
Ask yourself, if words are enough,  
Or if you'd be better off  
Flapping your wings from tree to  
tree  
And carrying on like a crow.

## **Driving Home**

Minister of our coming doom,  
preaching  
On the car radio, how right

Your hell and damnation sound to  
me  
As I travel these small, bleak  
roads  
Thinking of the mailman's son  
The army sent back in a sealed  
coffin.

His house is around the next turn.  
A forlorn mutt sits in the yard  
Waiting for someone to come  
home.  
I can see the TV is on in the living  
room,  
Canned laughter in the empty  
house  
Like the sound of beer cans tied to  
a hearse.

## Sightseeing in the Capital

These grand old buildings  
With their spacious conference  
rooms,  
Leather-padded doors,  
Where they weigh life and death  
Without a moment of fear  
Of ever being held accountable,

And then withdraw to dine in style  
And drink to each other's health

In private clubs and country estates,  
While we linger on the sidewalk  
Admiring the rows of windows  
The evening sun has struck blind.

## **Daughters of Memory**

There were three of them, always three,  
Sunbathing side by side on the beach,  
The sound of waves and children's voices so soothing  
It was hard to stay awake.

When I woke, the sun was setting.  
The three friends knelt in a circle  
Taking turns to peek into a small mirror  
And comb their hair with the same comb.

Months later, I happened to see two of them  
Running in the rain after school,  
Ducking into a doorway with a pack of cigarettes  
And a glance at me in my new uniform.

In the end, there was just one girl  
left,  
Tall and beautiful,  
Making late rounds in a hospital  
ward,  
Past a row of beds, one of which  
was mine.

## **In That Big House**

When she still knew how to make  
shadows speak  
By sitting with them a long time,  
They talked about her handsome  
father,  
His long absence, and how the  
quiet  
Would fill the house on snowy  
evenings.

“Tell us, child, are you afraid?”  
they’d ask,  
While the girl listened for steps in  
the hallway,  
The long, dim one with a full-  
length mirror  
That’s been going blind like her  
grandmother  
Who could no longer find or  
thread a needle

As she sat in the parlor  
remembering some actors  
Her son brought to dinner one  
night,  
The one young woman who  
wandered off by herself  
And was found later, after a long  
search,  
Floating naked in the black water  
of the pond.

## Puppet Maker

In his fear of solitude, he made us.  
Fearing eternity, he gave us time.  
I hear his white cane thumping  
Up and down the hall.

I expect neighbors to complain,  
but no.  
The little girl who sobbed  
When her daddy crawled into her  
bed  
Is quiet now.

It's quarter to two.  
On this street of darkened  
pawnshops,  
Welfare hotels and tenements,  
One or two ragged puppets are  
awake.

## **Summer Storm**

I'm going over to see what those  
weeds  
By the stone wall are fretting  
about.  
Perhaps they don't care for the  
way  
The shadows creep across the  
lawn  
In the silence of the afternoon.

The sky keeps being blue,  
Though we hear no birds,  
See no butterflies among the  
flowers,  
No ants running over our feet.  
As for the trees in our yard,

They bend their branches ever so  
slightly  
In deference to something  
About to make its entrance  
Of which we know nothing,  
Spellbound as we are by the  
deepening quiet.

## **The Melon**

There was a melon fresh from the  
garden  
So ripe the knife slurped  
As it cut it into six slices.  
The children were going back to  
school.  
Their mother, passing out paper  
plates,  
Would not live to see the leaves  
fall.

I remember a hornet, too, that flew  
in  
Through the open window  
Mad to taste the sweet fruit  
While we ducked and screamed,  
Covered our heads and faces,  
And sat laughing after it was  
gone.

## **The Lovers**

In the woods one fair Sunday,  
When we were children,  
We came upon a couple lying on  
the ground.

Hand in hand, ourselves afraid  
Of losing our way, we saw  
What we first thought was a patch  
of snow,

The two clutching each other  
naked  
On the bare ground, the wind  
Swaying the branches over them

As we stole by, never to find out  
Who they were, never to mention it  
afterwards  
To each other, or to anyone else.

## **The Empress**

My beloved, you who spend your  
nights  
T torturing me  
By holding up one mirror after  
another  
To me in the dark,  
If there's anything I know to say or  
do today,  
I merit no praise for it,  
But owe it to the subtlety of your  
torments,  
And your perseverance in keeping  
me awake.

All the same, who gave you the  
right  
To judge me in my wretchedness?  
What soul white as snow  
Compiled this endless list of  
misdeeds  
You read to me every night?  
The airs you put on when I tell you  
to stop  
Would make one believe  
You were once a bedmate of a  
Chinese emperor.

I like it best when we do not say a  
word.  
When we lie side by side  
Like two lovers after their passion  
is spent.  
Once again, day is breaking.  
A small bird in the trees is pouring  
her heart out  
At the miracle of the coming light.  
It hurts.  
The beauty of a night spent  
sleepless.

## The Toad

It'll be a while before my friends  
See me in the city,  
A while before we roam the

streets  
Late at night  
Shouting each other's names  
To point out some sight too  
wonderful  
Or too terrifying  
To give it a name in a hurry.

I'm staying put in the country,  
Rising early,  
Listening to the birds  
Greet the light,  
And when they fall quiet,  
To the wind in the leaves  
Which are as numerous here  
As the crowds in your city.

God never made a day as  
beautiful as today,  
A neighbor was saying.  
I sat in the shade after she left  
Mulling that one over,  
When a toad hopped out of the  
grass  
And, finding me harmless,  
Hopped over my foot on his way  
to the pond.

## **Summer Light**

It likes empty churches  
At the blue hour of dawn.

The shadows parting  
Like curtains in a sideshow,

The eyes of the crucified  
Staring down from the cross

As if seeing his bloody feet  
For the very first time.

## **The Invisible**

1

It was always here.  
Its vast terrors concealed  
By this costume party  
Of flowers and birds  
And children playing in the garden.

Only the leaves tell the truth.  
They rustle darkly,  
Then fall silent as if listening  
To a dragonfly  
Who may know a lot more of the  
invisible,

Or why else would its wings be  
So translucent in the light,  
So swift to take flight,  
One barely notices  
It's been here and gone.

## 2

Don't the shadows know  
something about it?  
The way they, too, come and go  
As if paying a visit to that other  
world  
Where they do what they do  
Before hurrying back to us.

Just today I was admiring the one  
I cast  
As I walked alone in the street  
And was about to engage it in  
conversation  
On this very topic  
When it took leave of me  
suddenly.

Shadow, I said, what message  
Will you bring back to me,  
And will it be full of dark  
ambiguities  
I can't even begin to imagine

As I make my slow way in the  
midday sun?

**3**

It may be hiding behind a door  
In some office building,  
Where one day you found yourself  
After hours  
With no one to ask for directions,  
Among the hundreds of doors  
All lacking information what sort  
of business,  
What sort of drudgery goes on  
Inside its narrow, poorly lit rooms.

Some detective agency  
That'll find God for a small fee?  
Some company ready to insure  
you,  
Should one day,  
Despite the promises of your  
parish priest,  
You turn up in hell?

The long hallway ends at a  
window  
Where even the light of the dying  
day  
Seems old and dusty.  
It understands what waiting is,  
And when found out

Appears surprised to see you  
here.

4

The moment you shut off the  
lamp,  
Here they are again,  
The two dead people  
You called your parents.

You'd hoped you'd see tonight  
The girl you loved once,  
And that other one who let you  
Slip a hand under her skirt.

Instead, here's that key in a saucer  
of small change  
That wouldn't open any lock,  
The used condom you found in  
church,  
The lame crow your neighbor  
kept.

Here's the fly you once tortured,  
A rock you threw at your best  
friend,  
The pig that let out a scream  
As the knife touched its throat.

5

People here still tell stories  
About a blind old man  
Who rolled dice on the sidewalk  
And paid children  
In the neighborhood  
To tell him what number came up.

When they were away in school,  
He'd ask anyone  
Whose steps he heard,  
The mailman making his rounds,  
The undertakers loading a coffin  
in their black wagon,  
And you, too, mister,  
Should you happen to come  
along.

## 6

Dark evening, gray old tenement,  
A white cat in one window,  
An old man eating his dinner in  
another.  
Everyone else hidden from view,

Like the one who waits for the tub  
To fill up with hot water  
While she undresses before a  
mirror  
Already beginning to steam over.

Imagination, devil's helper,  
Made me glimpse her two breasts  
As I hurried by with my face  
tucked in my collar,  
Because the wind was raw.

7

Dear Miss Russell:

Nights, you took me on a private  
tour  
Of the empty town library.  
I could hardly keep up  
As you darted along the rows of  
books,  
Whispering their names,  
Pointing out the ones I ought to  
read,

Then forgetting all about me,  
Pulling the light cord  
And leaving me in the dark  
To grope for a book  
Among the shelves,  
Surely the wrong one,

As I was soon to learn  
At the checkout desk  
Under your pitying gaze  
That followed me into the street  
Where I dared not stop

To see what I held in my hand  
Until I had rounded the corner.

8

A rusty key from a cigar box full of  
keys  
In a roadside junk shop.  
The one I held on to a long time  
Before I let it slip  
Through my fingers.

Most likely, when it was still in  
use,  
The reclusive author  
Of "The Minister's Black Veil"  
Was still cooped up  
In his mother's house in Salem.

It opened a small drawer  
With a stack of yellowed letters  
In a dresser with a mirror  
That gave back a pale face  
With a pair of feverish eyes

In a room with a view  
Of black, leafless trees  
And red clouds hurrying at sunset,  
Where soon tears fell  
Causing the key to go rusty.

9

O Persephone, is it true what they say,  
That everything that is beautiful,  
Even for one fleeting moment,  
Descends to you, never to return?

Dressmaker pinning a red dress in a store window,  
Old man walking your sickly old dog,  
Even you little children holding hands  
As you cross the busy street with your teacher,

What hope do you have for us today?

With the sky darkening so early,  
The first arriving flakes of snow,  
Falling here and there, then everywhere.

10

Invisible one, watching the snow  
Through a dark window  
From a row of dark schoolhouse windows,  
Making sure the snowflakes fall  
In proper order  
Where they were fated to fall

In the gray yard,  
And hush the moment they do.

The crow nodding his head  
As he walks by  
Must've been a professor of  
philosophy  
In a previous life  
Who despite changed  
circumstances  
Still opens his beak  
From time to time  
As if to address his adoring  
students,  
And seeing nothing but snow,  
Looks up puzzled  
At one of the dark windows.

## 11

Bird comforting the afflicted  
With your song,  
The one or two lying awake  
In the vast slumber  
Of small town and countryside,

Who know nothing of each other  
As they listen intently  
To every little tweet  
Afraid they'll do something  
To make it hush.

In the cool, silvery light,  
The outline of the window visible,  
Some trees in the yard  
About to let go of the night,  
The others in no big hurry.

## XIII

# ***from THE VOICE AT 3:00 A.M.***

## **Postcard from S.**

So far I've met here two Homers  
and one Virgil.

The town is like a living anthology  
of classic literature.

Thunder and lightning almost  
every afternoon.

When neighbors meet, they slap  
mosquitoes

On each other's foreheads and go  
off red in the face.

I'm lying in a hammock next to a  
burning barn

Watching a birch tree in the yard.  
One minute it wrestles with the  
wind and smoke,

The next it raises its fists to curse  
the gods.

That, of course, makes it a Trojan  
To the Greeks just arriving on a  
fire engine.

## **Empty Barbershop**

In pursuit of happiness, you may  
yet  
Draw close to it momentarily  
In one of these two leather-bound  
chairs  
With the help of scissors and a  
comb,

Draped to the chin with a long  
white sheet,  
While your head slips through  
The invisible barber's greasy  
fingers  
Making your hair stand up  
straight,

While he presses the razor to your  
throat,  
Causing your eyes to spring open  
As you discern in the mirror before  
you  
The full length of the empty  
barbershop

With two vacant chairs and past  
them  
The street, commensurately  
empty,  
Except for the pressed and blurred  
face  
Of someone straining to look  
inside.

## **Grayheaded Schoolchildren**

Old men have bad dreams,  
So they sleep little.  
They walk on bare feet  
Without turning on the lights,  
Or they stand leaning  
On gloomy furniture  
Listening to their hearts beat.

The one window across the room  
Is black like a blackboard.  
Every old man is alone  
In this classroom, squinting  
At that fine chalk line  
That divides being-here  
From being-here-no-more.

No matter. It was a glass of water  
They were going to get,  
But not just yet.  
They listen for mice in the walls,

A car passing on the street,  
Their dead fathers shuffling past  
them  
On their way to the kitchen.

## Serving Time

Another dreary day in time's  
invisible  
Penitentiary, making license  
plates  
With lots of zeros, walking  
lockstep counter-  
clockwise in the exercise yard or  
watching  
The lights dim when some poor  
fellow,  
Who could as well be me, gets  
fried.

Here on death row, I read a lot of  
books.  
First it was law, as you'd expect.  
Then came history, ancient and  
modern.  
Finally philosophy—all that being-  
and-nothingness stuff.  
The more I read, the less I  
understand.  
Still, other inmates call me  
professor.

Did I mention that we had no  
guards?  
It's a closed book who locks  
And unlocks the cell doors for us.  
Even the executions we carry out  
By ourselves, attaching the wires,  
Playing warden, playing chaplain

All because a little voice in our  
head  
Whispers something about our  
last appeal  
Being denied by God himself.  
The others hear nothing, of  
course,  
But that, typically, you may as well  
face it,  
Is how time runs things around  
here.

## **Autumn Sky**

In my great-grandmother's time,  
All one needed was a broom  
To get to see places  
And give the geese a chase in the  
sky.

.

The stars know everything,  
So we try to read their minds.  
As distant as they are,  
We choose to whisper in their  
presence.

.

Oh, Cynthia,  
Take a clock that has lost its  
hands  
For a ride.  
Get me a room at Hotel Eternity  
Where Time likes to stop now and  
then.

.

Come, lovers of dark corners,  
The sky says,  
And sit in one of my dark corners.  
There are tasty little zeros  
In the peanut dish tonight.

## **Separate Truths**

Night fell without asking  
For our permission.  
Mary had a headache,  
And my eyes hurt

From squinting at the  
newspapers.

We could still make out  
A few old trees in the yard.  
They take it as it comes.  
Separate truths  
Do not interest them.

We'll have to run for it, I said,  
And had no idea what I meant.  
The coming of the inevitable,  
What a strange bliss that is,  
And I had no idea what she  
meant.

## **Late September**

The mail truck goes down the  
coast  
Carrying a single letter.  
At the end of a long pier  
The bored seagull lifts a leg now  
and then  
And forgets to put it down.  
There is a menace in the air  
Of tragedies in the making.

Last night you thought you heard  
television  
In the house next door.

You were sure it was some new  
Horror they were reporting,  
So you went out to find out.  
Barefoot, wearing just shorts.  
It was only the sea sounding  
weary  
After so many lifetimes  
Of pretending to be rushing off  
somewhere  
And never getting anywhere.

This morning, it felt like Sunday.  
The heavens did their part  
By casting no shadow along the  
boardwalk  
Or the row of vacant cottages,  
Among them a small church  
With a dozen gray tombstones  
huddled close  
As if they, too, had the shivers.

## **NEW POEMS**

### **I'm Charles**

Swaying handcuffed  
On an invisible scaffold,  
Hung by the unsayable  
Little something  
Night and day take turns  
Paring down further.  
My mind's a ghost house  
Open to the starlight.  
My back's covered with graffiti  
Like an elevated train.  
Snowflakes swarm  
Around my bare head  
Choking with laughter  
At my last-minute contortions  
To write something on my chest  
With my already bitten,  
Already bleeding tongue.

# Things Need Me

City of poorly loved chairs,  
bedroom slippers, frying pans,  
I'm rushing back to you  
Passing every car on the highway,  
Searching for you with my bright  
headlights  
Down the dark, empty streets.

O you heartless people who can't  
wait  
To go to the beach tomorrow  
morning,  
What about the black-and-white  
photo of the grandparents  
You are abandoning?  
What about the mirrors, the potted  
plants and the  
coat hangers?

Dead alarm clock, empty birdcage,  
piano I never play,  
I'll be your waiter tonight  
Ready to take your order,  
And you'll be my distinguished  
dinner guests,  
Each one with a story to tell.

# **One-Man Circus**

Juggler of hats and live hand  
grenades.  
Tumbler, contortionist,  
impersonator,  
Living statue, wire walker, escape  
artist,  
Amateur ventriloquist and mind  
reader

Doing all that without being  
detected  
While leisurely strolling down the  
street,  
Buying a newspaper on some  
corner,  
Bending down to pat a blind man's  
dog,

Or sitting across from your wife at  
dinner,  
While she prattles about the  
weather,  
Concentrating instead on a  
trapeze in your head,  
The tigers pacing angrily in their  
cage.

# Lingering Ghosts

Give me a long dark night and no sleep,  
And I'll visit every place I have ever lived,  
Starting with the house where I was born.  
I'll sit in my parents' dimmed bedroom  
Straining to hear the tick of their clock.

I'll roam the old neighborhood hunting for friends,  
Enter junk-filled backyards where trees  
Look like war cripples on crutches,  
Stop by a tree stump where Grandma  
Made roosters and hens walk around headless.

A black cat will slip out of the shadows  
And rub herself against my leg  
To let me know she'll be my guide tonight  
On this street with its missing buildings,  
Missing faces and few lingering ghosts.

## **Ventriloquist Convention**

For those troubled in mind  
Afraid to remain alone  
With their own thoughts,  
Who quiz every sound  
The night makes around them,

A discreet tap on the door,  
A whispered invitation  
To where they have all gathered  
In a room down the hall  
Ready to entertain you

In a voice of your parents,  
The pretty girl you knew once,  
One or two dead friends  
All pressing close to you  
As if wishing to share a secret,

The one with slick black hair  
Leaning into your face,  
Eyes popping out of his head,  
His mouth hanging down  
Like a butcher's bloody scale.

## **The Future**

It must have a reason for  
concealing

Its many surprises from us,  
And that reason must have  
something to do  
With either compassion or malice.

I know that most of us fear it,  
And that surely is the explanation  
We've never been properly  
introduced,  
Though we are neighbors

Who run into each other often  
By accident and then stand there  
Speechless and embarrassed,  
Before pretending to be distracted

By some children walking to  
school,  
A pigeon pecking at a pizza crust  
Next to a hearse filled with  
flowers  
Parked in front of a small, gray  
church.

## **Softly**

Lay the knife and fork by your  
plate.  
Here, where it's always wartime,  
It's prudent to break bread  
unobserved,

Take small sips of wine or beer  
Sneaking glances at your  
companions.

June evening, how your birds  
worry me.  
I can hear them rejoicing in the  
trees  
Oblivious of the troubles that lie  
ahead.  
The fly on the table is more  
cautious  
And so are my bare feet under the  
table.

Hundreds of bloody flags fleeing  
at sunset  
Across the darkening plains.  
Some general leading another  
army into defeat,  
While you pour honey over the  
walnuts,  
And I wait my turn to lick the  
spoon.

## The Starry Sky

Taken as a whole, it's a mystery.  
An apparent order concealing a  
disorder  
That would shake us to the core

Were we ever to grasp its  
senselessness,  
Its infinite, raging madness,

Which, for all we know, may be  
contagious  
And explains our terror  
At seeing these crowds at the end  
of day  
Convinced a murderer or a lunatic  
We'll be hearing about on the late  
news  
Strolls among them now  
peacefully,

Or so I was telling the old Mrs.  
Murphy  
Who was on her way to church  
To pray for the soul of her dead  
husband,  
Who she suspected was in hell  
And needed to hear her voice as  
he burned.

## Solitude in Hotels

Where you went to hide from  
everyone  
In a city people visit for other  
reasons,  
In a room with a Don't Disturb sign

Left on the door day and night,  
While you sat around in your  
underwear  
Staring at the dead TV screen for  
hours,

Waiting for after midnight to  
sneak  
Past the desk clerk in the lobby  
and visit  
Some ill-lit dive in the  
neighborhood  
For a beer or two and a bite to eat  
Then a walk along dark, deserted  
streets  
In no hurry and no direction in  
mind,

Slipping back into bed toward  
daybreak  
To lie awake listening to the rain,  
While the leaves outside the  
window  
Turn the color of fire, the one you  
read  
Was started by some boy in  
church  
To impress his pale and silent  
girlfriend.

## **In the Egyptian Wing of the Museum**

Against a coffin thickly  
ornamented  
With paintings representing  
The burial rites and duties of the  
soul  
They undid each other's buttons  
With all of their fingers on fire.

He, upright like an unicyclist  
Going up a pyramid.  
She, like a white dove fluttering  
In the hands of a magician  
Performing at a mortician's  
convention,

While the dog-headed god  
Weighed a dead man's heart  
Against a single feather,  
And the ibis-headed one  
Made ready to record the  
outcome.

## **Grandpa's Spells**

I hate to hear birds sing  
Come spring, the wood turn green

And little flowers sprout  
Along the country roads.

Bleak skies, short days,  
And long nights please me best.  
I like to cloister myself  
Watching my thoughts roam

Like a homeless family  
Holding on to their children  
And their few possessions  
Seeking shelter for the night.

And I love most of all knowing  
I'm here today, gone tomorrow,  
The dark sneaking up on me,  
To blow out the match in my hand.

## Trouble Coming

One saw signs of it in certain  
families.  
The future was like an unfriendly  
waiter  
Standing ready to take their dinner  
order  
From a menu they could not read.

To look without understanding  
was their lot  
While a salesman in the TV store

Kept changing channels too  
quickly  
For them to retain a single image.

The little flags freshly posted in a  
cemetery  
Said nothing as they hung  
listlessly  
In the early-summer breeze,  
Not that anybody particularly  
noticed.

The sunset over the approaching  
city  
Was like a banquet in a madhouse  
The inmates were happily setting  
on fire  
Just as our train ducked into a  
tunnel.

## **Nothing Else**

Friends of the small hours of the  
night:  
Stub of a pencil, small notebook,  
Reading lamp on the table,  
Making me welcome in your circle  
of light.

I care little the house is dark and  
cold

With you sharing my absorption  
In this book in which now and  
then a sentence  
Is worth repeating in a whisper.

Without you, there'd be only my  
pale face  
Reflected in the black  
windowpane,  
And the bare trees and deep snow  
Waiting for me out there in the  
dark.

## The Foundlings

Time's hurrying me, putting me to  
the test  
To picture to myself what comes  
next.  
My mind is eager. I no longer  
plead with it  
To keep still so we can get some  
rest.  
We've been this way far too long  
now.

Like newborn twins, left side by  
side  
On the same church steps by their  
mother  
For some pious early riser to find

us,  
And either give a shout or take us  
home,  
We'll stay here comforting each  
other.

Soon now these stone steps will  
turn pink  
And the pigeons and the sparrows  
Will fly down to them in search for  
crumbs  
The blind old men who beg here  
for alms  
Let drop as they ate their bread in  
the dark.

## **Strange Feast**

It makes my heart glad to hear  
one of these  
Chirpy little birds just back from  
Mexico—  
Or wherever it is they spend their  
winters—  
Come and sit in a tree outside my  
window.

I want to stay in bed all morning  
Listening to the returning ones  
greet the friends  
They left behind, since in their

rapture  
At being together, I find my own  
joy,  
  
As if a festive table was being set  
in the garden  
By two composed and somber  
women  
Clad in dresses too light for this  
time of year,  
Mindful every glass and fork is in  
its proper place,

Leaving me uncertain whether to  
close my eyes,  
Or to hurry in shorts over the old  
snow  
And make sure the dishes they've  
laid out  
Are truly there to be savored by  
one like me.

## In a Dark House

One night, as I was dropping off to  
sleep,  
I saw a strip of light under a door  
I had never noticed was there  
before,  
And both feared and wanted  
To go over and knock on it softly.

In a dark house, where a strip of  
light  
Under a door I didn't know existed  
Appeared and disappeared, as if  
they  
Had turned off the light and lay  
awake  
Like me waiting for what comes  
next.

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